Hakuinden, a Byakko Legend: Volume I : Rekishi

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Complete

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Hakuinden, a Byakko Legend: Volume I : Rekishi

VraieEsprit

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This story was first published on September 2nd, 2008, and was last updated on October 17th, 2008.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g6789x/10700E581

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Summary

title	Hakuinden, a Byakko Legend: Volume I : Rekishi
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4515343/
published	September 2nd, 2008
updated	October 17th, 2008
words	113,429
chapters	16
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Adventure, Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fantasy, Fushigi Yuugi, Tatara

Description

100 years ago Byakko's Seishi saved Sairou, at a heavy cost. Now, a century on, Toroki's last prophesy is about to come true, as the past and the future collide in Byakko's desperate attempt to put his land to rights. Byakko's legend, past and future.

Chapter 1

Introduction & Disclaimer

This story is intended as a continuation — of sorts — from the Shinzahou Chronicles… set approximately a year and a half on from the events in Kutou. So some characters will be reprised. But it is — in many ways — more of a typical Miko legend. In as much as I ever write anything typical to the original concept… lets call it a spinoff of a spinoff, shall we? :D

It is not intended as simply Suzuno's legend as Byakko no Miko. *This is largely because I'm not well enough informed on the period from a real-world Japan perspective and I don't want to venture into things I don't understand.* **That said, I do intend on including my interpretation of Suzuno's legend extensively in this story in one way or another**. It's hard to really explain, but I suppose this will run the past legend (as interpreted by me) alongside the future one (as created by me). I just didn't want to write too much about Morioka and Suzuno's life there, because, as I said, I'm not informed. *(I may have used the Genbu Kaiden manga for some corroborating data relating to Suzuno and Takiko, but in incidences where GK conflicts with original manga, I've gone with original manga every time)*.

I have also interpreted Suzuno as being sixteen when she enters the book. Simple reason for this is that Miaka and Yui were fifteen, Takiko was seventeen. Sixteen seems nicely in the middle :)

The most important part of this disclaimer is the fact that at times I've been wilfully toying with the souls of Watase Yuu-sensei's Byakko characters to suit my own ends and purposes. For this reason I've devised my own backstory for the Byakko and the manner in which they and Suzuno saved Sairou years before. Obviously, if she ever writes an official version, this kind of fiction will be a bit of a nonsense. But eh. It's still fun to do.

(P.S — what is WITH ffnet's character list?! Only Tatara features on it! Meh!)

As I've observed before, my fanon and the Gaiden Eikouden continue to part ways . I'll add to that elements of Yuuaiden and possibly ShugyokuDen too, although in the latter case it won't be a complete parting. I'm just fed up of Kutou always invading the other countries and the same story rolling out over again. So I've given it a

different twist. It was a case of, do I stick rigidly to the handful of throwaway details and make the story jerky and confused, or do just plot a story and not worry too much about those details. In the end, artistic pride won over accuracy. *To any purists, gomen :S*

*((One other thing. Sukunami Hikari girl in Vraie's brain.Hikari is a girl's name, darnit. A **girl's** name! To that end, when reading my fanfic, assume that the child at the end of the manga is who Makoto is written to be, since that's why Hikari was given a brother in my writing in the first place.*

Again, to the purists, gomen.))

Hopefully my interpretation of the past and future Byakko incarnations and legends are not impossible to fit into the existing world as we know it from the manga, etc. Tokaki, Tatara and Subaru will continue to possess the same gender and powers in their new incarnations as the last, just to keep it from being confusing. Any other Byakko Seishi — beyond the basic name — have been devised by me.

Obviously a proportion of this story is going to be connected with Sairou and Sairou's court. For this reason, a royal family of Sairou has been spawned. There will also be a lot of travelling as regards various characters in this story… ah, you'll see what I mean. Place names in Sairou have also been invented to suit the story where they've been needed. I have no idea if any canon place names for Sairou exist beyond the valley with the giant buddha. So I stuck with my own concept of Sairou, its geography and people.

((Makan-mura has been left in Hokkan as indicated in the original manga which puts it 'near the Sairou border', whatever later sources have to say about it. So Amiboshi probably won't be in this story.))

Final comment is on the title — back to the tacky novel copying I'm afraid. The kanji mean "White" 'Tiger' and "Legend" although the kanji for "Tiger" isn't the usual kanji for the animal — rather it's the one belonging to the stellar Chinese zodiac Tiger. Somehow it seemed appropriate that way… The title of Volume One is "*Rekishi*" which means "Past" or more aptly, "History" :)

As ever, I do not own the Yuugi world and all original FY characters and concepts are copyright to Watase Yuu-sensei :) The Gaiden, with whose canon I am wilfully meddling, are also copyright to Nishizaki Megumi-sensei.

白寅伝

Hakuinden: The Legend of the White Tiger

第一巻：歴史

Volume One: Rekishi

"Betsu no sekai ni itemo, kokoro wa hitotsu ni musubarete iru"

(Even when you're in a different world, our hearts are tied together into one)

Tatara "Seed"

Synopsis

It's been eighteen months since the disappearance of Sukunami Hikari into the book world and as her family try and move on with normal life in her absence, her best friend Arina is determined to find out as much as she can about the ShijinTenchishou. After receiving Oosugi Suzuno's diary from Hikari's uncle Keisuke, she begins to find that there is more to the legend of the Miko than she had ever realised before. Inexplicably drawn to both Suzuno and her adventures, Arina makes up her mind to go to Morioka to visit the woman's grave and discover exactly what it is that makes her story so compelling.

In the Eastern capital, Myoume has put both her Celestial past and her memories of her brother to rest as she awaits the birth of her first child, whilst Hikari has settled into life in the South and is a regular fixation at Reizeitei-sama's court. And yet, as the atmosphere becomes ever more unsettled, both Seishi and Shinzahou are unaware that what is coming may threaten both their lives and their friendship. For in Sairou, the Emperor Heiboutei's court astrologer Han Rouhei is already making predictions — that before too long their country's peace will once more be threatened, and that, just as before, those born with Byakko's spirit will once more be called into action to defend both people and country with their lives.

Meanwhile, Heiboutei's daughter Princess Ouba is preparing to move half a world away to take up her role as a political pawn of marriage between the East and West. With her loyal companion Kinka and her brother's faithful man of arms Sayo as her guardians, Ouba is certain she is in safe hands, and yet she cannot help being fearful of the road ahead. Kintsusei may have brought peace to Kutou, but he is still the son of the reviled Emperor Shoukitei, and he is still more than twice her age. As they travel East, Ouba becomes more and more aware that Kinka is hiding something important from her — but what could it be?

The answer is sealed deep within a cave in the Tanin mountains, as a darkness threatens to unleash itself once more over the West…

Prologue
The Kanin Mountains, Sairou
A Century Earlier

So now there was no doubt.

The young woman sat back on her heels, regarding her reflection in the water with a sense of resignation as she took in the spreading darkness that reflected in the depths of her distinctive emerald gaze. All around her, she could sense rather than see the flickering of the crystals as they hummed and glowed with energy and light. Yet even they too were fading, little by little, as the magic invested in them began to break and die away.

There was nothing that could be done to change it. Of all people, she knew that better than any of them. It was, after all, written in the stars.

"The battle is not yet over, is it, Byakko-kami-sama?" She whispered, raising her gaze to the ceiling of the cave as if hoping for some divine light to strike down and illuminate the shadows that cloaked her heart. But she knew that they would not come. That time had passed.

"Suzuno-sama." Gently the woman slipped the black gauze gloves from her fingers, stretching them until a distinctive white mark began to glitter on the uppermost tip of her right index finger. "Byakko no Miko, in whom we all placed our faith. You saved Sairou — but you couldn't save us. You went home — as a Miko must — your wishes granted and your deed done. I cannot fault you — I will not fault you. You are someone in whom I pledged my faith and I would do so again, even knowing what I know now. Thanks to you, Sairou's people can live in peace without fear of persecution or war. These are great things indeed. And yet…"

She trailed off, eying her finger for a moment then, very slowly and carefully she reached out towards the water's surface, feeling the buzz of energy strike through her skin as her stellar mark made contact with the cool, bitter mountain liquid.

"Time is running out." She murmured. "I cannot change it — I cannot stop time, not can I turn it back. But… even so… would I? If I had that choice… could I?"

"Toroki?"

A voice from the cave doorway made her turn and her lips twitched into a tired smile as she drew her hand away from the water, folding it idly in her lap. The speaker was a young woman of seventeen or eighteen, thick silver-white hair drawn back from her face in curls, and her usually cheeky, minxish countenance uncharacteristically solemn as she met her comrade's gaze.

"You are still here, then. You truly intend to keep guard over this place until you waste away to nothing?"

"I'm doing what I have to, just as all of us do." Toroki said simply, spreading her hands in a gesture of resignation. "This place is tainted.

There is darkness here. Our duty is to protect Sairou from harm, isn't it? In which case, somehow… the story of this place must be told."

"*You'll do no good if you starve yourself pacing round an empty cavern." The other woman scolded, dropping gracefully down at her side and crossing her legs as she did so. "You've already lost weight, Toroki — you need to eat, you know. What kind of foolish prophet can't even feed herself, when all is said and done?"*

Toroki was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head.

"I saw it." She said softly. "It's too late, Subaru. I saw it already… it can't be changed now."

"*Saw it? Saw what?" Subaru stared at her in consternation. "What are you talking about? I thought your duty — and your visions — had come to an end already!"*

"*Does it ever end, the service of the God?" Toroki raised a humourless smile. "The demands of Byakko on our souls cycle round generation after generation, Subaru. We won't be the first or the last people to live these lives. Whether we are the first to answer Byakko's call so decisively I couldn't tell you. But we won't be the last. Of that I am sure. This war is not over yet. Byakko's fight… has only just begun."*

"*I hate it when you're like this." Subaru complained, shaking her head impatiently. "I came to drag you away from here — to the place where Tatara and Tokaki are secluding the Shinzahou. That's our duty now, if anything is — protecting Suzuno-chan's treasure from prying eyes and hands. Tatara gave Suzuno his word, when she left, that he'd guard it with his life. And we all made her a promise, too — to stick together — live and die together — no matter what. Suzaku and Seiryuu have not yet played out their legends, after all. We must protect the mirror, if we want to uphold Byakko's faith in us. Not sit around in an empty cave whispering about the stars. This battleground is deserted. We should go too."*

"*Amefuri is dead." Toroki got slowly to her feet, and Subaru gazed at her, shock glittering in her eyes.*

*"**Dead**?"*

"Yes." Toroki's lips twitched into a bitter smile.

"But… Suzuno's promise…" Subaru faltered, and Toroki shook her head.

"A naive promise none of us can easily keep." She said softly. "To live and to die together — well, perhaps there is truth in it, though I really hope not. To live and to die… Subaru, we are already divided by something

beyond our control."

"I don't understand." Subaru frowned. "Stop talking in riddles and speak clearly, Toroki. I want to know what you mean."

"Amefuri is only the first." Toroki said frankly, settling her thin frame more easily on the ground. "Subaru-chan, listen to me and listen well. When I touched the Shinzahou — when I connected with the energy from that thing, my vision soared far and wide and I saw so many things — pasts, presents, futures… lives and voices all merged into one morass of sound and colour. And in that melee I saw something else — something which none of us were able to forsee. Not even me, with the powers Byakko gave me… not even then."

"*But I don't… Amefuri is…"*

"*We summoned Byakko, we brought peace to Sairou, we confined a demon to a place where she cannot leave." Toroki said quietly. "All these things we did with Suzuno's help, and for that reason, people across the Western lands can live in peace. But it isn't over, Subaru. That demon is confined, but she is not gone. And her magic still taints this world. In a deeper way than I ever realised it could."*

She sighed, slipping on her black gloves.

"Amefuri was the first." She said simply. "I saw it, his wits and mind driven to madness and his soul struck from his body as he fought to drive the darkness back. We all knew that after his encounter with Makiko he was never in full health — yet he even kept from me, his kinswoman, the true depth of his pain. Perhaps I was just not close enough to him, in the end… perhaps the time we spent apart meant that the gulf between his branch of the clan and mine was too wide for him to breach and confide. Had I had warning… but even then I don't think we could have stopped it. Short of not summoning Byakko, there was no way to avoid it happening like this. And as for Amefuri himself, in the end, he could not fight it any more."

She shivered involuntarily.

"You're still not being clear." Subaru scolded. "What was he fighting? Amefuri was my friend and comrade as much as yours — even if you were estranged, you Han-ke are alike, Toroki-chan. Sometimes you keep everything locked inside your heart and don't speak about it, even if its burning you to the core. Amefuri was that way, and now you're proving to be the same. You were kin, but we were all Byakko brethren. At least tell me the truth about what happened."

Toroki sighed.

“Amefuri’s death isn’t an end to the story.” She murmured, genuine grief in her gaze. “Each of us are cursed, Subaru. Cursed beyond Byakko’s coming — cursed to disaster by that wicked woman’s foul spirit. In sealing her, we were each touched by her. Maybe Suzuno was too — I don’t know. I pray that, by leaving this world, she has somehow escaped it. But even so… even if she has… we are not so fortunate. Amefuri was only the first. Each of us are doomed to fall foul of it in some way, Subaru. To suffer under her curse, one by one. Perhaps to die, perhaps to live with shadows dogging our every move. Even Suzuno’s wishes haven’t changed the damage the witch has wrought over all of us.”

She spread her hands.

“He kept it from all of us and even I didn’t see it.” She added helplessly. “Till now. Till the moment we were all connected into one spirit. Then the curse’s taint surged across our bond and poisoned us all. He tried to protect us from it, yet in the end we had to summon Byakko. And in doing so, we spread that darkness between us. I think that as much as anything drove Amefuri to the ultimate despair. He worked so hard to prevent it — but in the end, he failed. And now we’ll all pay the price for it.”

Subaru was silent for a moment, digesting this.

“*There is nothing we can do to change it?” She asked at length. “This is Byakko’s will — he won’t intervene on our behalves?”*

“*How can he act, when his Miko has fulfilled her purpose and gone home?” Toroki asked helplessly. “Her job is not to protect the Seishi… it’s ours to protect her.”*

She sighed.

“Although… it did occur to me… that you and you alone might be strong enough to escape the demon’s fate.” She added slowly. “Which is why you should watch over Tatara, Subaru, and keep him safe from harm. The curse will undoubtedly strike each of us one by one… yet your ability to stave and change the age of people’s forms may yet allow you — and even him — to withstand it. If you could take him to Byakko’s shrine and use your power to still his life force at the age he now is… that may at least protect him from death, and allow him to do the last thing he can for Suzuno — protect her treasure from harm. Perhaps we can’t all keep our promise to Suzuno — but you, at the very least, might.”

“*Tatara broke his heart over that girl.” Subaru mused, uncharacteristically serious. “I understand what you’re saying, although it seems almost a curse in itself that he be forced to live like this, separated from her, when he so bound himself to her.”*

“He should have known better.” Toroki said softly. “As Seishi, we had a duty to do… he was foolish to let it go beyond that. We both know it, Subaru. Even as we both miss Suzuno and grieve for Tatara… that it had to end… was of no surprise.”

Subaru sighed.

“All right.” She said quietly. “I understand what you’ve said, at least as much as I think I’m going to. You’re saying that that witch cast a final spell on us when we locked her in this place, and through that spell she’s still able to hurt us, one by one? Without Suzuno, we can’t call Byakko back. And all I can do is try and keep the curse at bay within Tatara’s body — and mine, if I can. But what about you, Toroki? Or Kokie, or Karasuki… or… or Tokaki? I can’t… even if Amefuri is… I can’t…”

“I will probably not live much longer.” Toroki admitted, a wistful look touching her expression. “You commented on my lost weight — but it isn’t that I don’t eat, more that I can’t. My delusions and dreams are becoming violent and desperate… I think soon they will consume me. This is how Makiko’s poison works its way through me — there is no way for me to escape it now.”

She chewed absently on her lip, contemplating.

“And I do not fear it.” She added. “I have done the things that I most had to do, after all.”

“Toroki!” Subaru shook her head. “I’ve never known you to be defeatist — why now?”

“Because our duty is over. Mine is, anyhow.” Toroki responded simply. “Not yours, however. I feel that very strongly. Your focus should be Tatara and Tatara alone, Subaru-chan. He is the one trusted to protect the Shinzahou. It must be him whose life you still. Within Byakko’s shrine, where the Tiger’s aura is still strongest… you must.”

Subaru glanced at the floor.

“I could still try and help everyone.”

“Don’t be foolish. You’d kill yourself trying to use your power so much for so long on so many people.”

“The Byakko are my brethren — why wouldn’t I want to take the risk?”

Toroki closed her eyes, composing herself as flickers of darkness threatened to slip through the cracks in her mind.

“I told you. I’ve already seen it.” She said quietly. “Our fight is over. The curse will poison us — each of us — one by one, in a way even our

deaths can't end. You are the only one whose power might at least hold it back — but Subaru-chan, be careful. Just because you might not submit to that witch's magic in this lifetime doesn't mean that the darkness won't touch you in some way. I can't explain it — I don't know what it means, and my time to decipher it is running out. Only that Makiko's bleak vision of the future hasn't been destroyed — only postponed. And at some time in the future we will be like this again, you and I."

"I don't understand what that means." Subaru admitted. "Toroki, you've never been like this before. It scares me, to be honest."

"I've told you as much as I know." Toroki smiled. "Subaru, you mustn't come back to this place. Not now and not ever. Do you understand? Never. Even to bury my body or say prayers for my soul. Because if you do come back here, you will be the one who sets the demon free… and such a thing must not be allowed to come to pass."

"Why would I do something like that?" Subaru snorted. "Don't be silly. After all the work we went to to put her away? The last thing I'd do is let her roam the land again. Especially if it's at such a high cost as this."

"Even so, promise me." Toroki said quietly. "I mean it, Subaru. You must not come here again."

Subaru grimaced.

"All right." She relented. "You have my word, Toroki. I won't come back here. But it seems harsh. Especially if you are… weak. You won't come with me?"

"I won't leave this place." Toroki shook her head. "This is where I belong… this time, and next time, and maybe some time again."

"You're confusing me again." Subaru objected, and Toroki sighed, rubbing her temples.

"I'm sorry." She confessed. "Since I made contact with that mirror, nothing has made clear sense in my head. It's probably better I don't speak any more to you, in case I muddle you further. Just go back to the place where Tatara has the mirror concealed. Stay near to him and guard him as best you can."

"Tokaki is there too, Toroki." Subaru hesitated, then, "I don't intend on letting him die either, you know."

Toroki eyed her keenly, then she shrugged.

"I know that." She admitted. "And perhaps, through the bond you share, you can manage it somehow. But the most important thing is the Shinzahou, Subaru-chan. One day, a foreign Priestess will come to claim it,

and you will have to make the judgement as to whether or not she is worthy. Such a task Byakko leaves in your hands — you who of all of us may yet live to see another God's summoning."

"*Another summoning? In Sairou?"*

"*Yes. In Sairou."*

"*But…?"*

"*I won't explain what I don't know."* Toroki sighed. "*My head aches and I need to sleep. Just do as I say, Subaru. Promise me you will. One day we will meet gazes again and speak as strangers, and I pray in that time I'll be of more use to you than I am in this. But till then, do as I ask you. Protect Byakko's treasure from harm… until the time we next meet again."*

Subaru got to her feet, then hesitated, turning to glance back at her friend.

"I'll send Tokaki with food." She said softly. "*Because no matter what you say, I won't abandon you to die here alone and uncared for. You're not going to starve to death, whatever other forces are involved, Toroki. Byakko might be gone but I have no intention of abandoning my comrades. That goes for Kokie and Karasuki too. However hopeless you think it is, I won't just turn my back. I can try, at the very least. And I* ***will*** *protect Tatara — for as long as there's breath in me, I'll ensure he can do the job Suzuno left him to do. But I'll protect the others as well, as long as I can. That includes you. Don't think otherwise."*

At this, Toroki managed a faint smile.

"*Byakko would like that, if he heard it."* She reflected. "*Whatever you think is best. The future is in your hands now, Subaru-chan. And I know… somehow… you'll manage it. For the sake of all we fought for and all we went through… I know that somehow you'll succeed!"*

Writer's Note: Suffixes

It should be mentioned briefly that a lot of my characters will be referring to their family in the manner Subaru uses above — ie, with the suffix -ke. It dawned on me therefore that a brief suffixography would be helpful at this point… So, for future reference here it is:

—ke "family (for example, Han-ke— Han family)
-mura" village "(for example, Shouki-mura — Shouki Village)
-gawa" river "(for example, Shouryuu-gawa — Shouryuu River)
-zan" mountain "(for example, Reikaku-zan — Mt Reikaku)
-shi" city "(for example Touran-shi — Touran City)

-ken" province "(for example Kusou-ken, Kusou province)
-jin" people "(for example, Sairou-jin — people of/from Sairou)

The word 'ichizoku' or clan/tribe may also make an appearance (eg Hin-ichizoku, the Hin Clan)

Hopefully that will clear things up if anyone is confused!

Chapter 2

Chapter One
A Century On

"It looks like at long last the Winter frosts are breaking."

Tou Myoume rested her hands on the wooden sill of the window, gazing down pensively at the glittering ground that still sparkled below. "With the way Kutou's climate is, I don't suppose I'll ever get used to how beautiful Winter is here — but as a child of the desert, I'm glad to see it fade."

"For my part, a little more snow would be quite welcome." Her companion said, amused, and Myoume turned, nodding her head.

"We are chalk and cheese in that respect." She reflected. "But all in all it seems to have been in our favour. Don't you think so too, Hyoushin?"

The man in the doorway laughed, nodding his head.

"I wouldn't argue." He acknowledged. "I am quite content with the way that things currently are."

Myoume leant back against the glass, eying him contemplatively as she did so. Even now, she mused ruefully, robed in the uniform of a high ranking Kutou military official, there was no concealing her husband's distinctive tribal origins. His skin was pale — almost as pale as the snow which until a week earlier had dusted most of the grounds around the Royal Palace of Kutou, and though his long hair was pulled back in a regulation warrior's queue, it was silver in hue, not the dark ebony of most of his compatriots. His cheek was still criss-crossed with the relic of his time in slavery, and Myoume knew that beneath the fine fabrics and elaborate armour there were many more scars across his body that told of a childhood spent in pain and drudgery. And yet she also knew that this past no longer defined him, nor did it shadow his every movement or thought.

Just as his complexion was the snow-fairness of the northern tribes, so was his gaze the colour of amethyst, his eyes reminding Myoume of some rare and exotic gemstone that could have been mined near the mountains where, as a child, she had often played. When they had first met, Myoume remembered, those eyes had often been clouded and impassive, as if the weight of the entire world was on his

shoulders alone. Now, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Whereas once he had been viewed as a war spirit or a ghost among men by his fellows, now there was no mistaking the life that shone with warmth and vigour from those two violet pools of light. Even now she knew that his eyes were his most striking feature — truly windows to the complicated soul that lay beneath. In the past, those windows had been locked and barred, but, as time had gone on, she had seen more and more of the tribesman's true self begin to break through the once impassive demeanour.

At his waist hung a distinctively styled sword, its hilt carved, stained, polished and gilted by the best craftsmen in Kutou. The image was unmistakeably the snarling form of the Azure Dragon of the East, the God which watched over Kutou, and whenever she saw it Myoume found herself smiling ruefully, for she knew that despite his Imperial loyalties, her husband had never had any time for the cult of Seiryuu or the magic of the four Gods. It was a unique weapon, designed and crafted to fit its equally unique owner, for Hyoushin wielded his blade in his left fist and even now none who had been trained by him had ever managed to disarm him. He had sworn his soul and his loyalty to his Emperor almost twenty years before, but from that vow had sprung a true and firm friendship between the two men, and Myoume knew that, in many ways, meeting Kintsusei had been the first in a series of turning points that had transformed a battered slave into a warrior who had fought and succeeded in bringing peace to his land.

"He *is* different. But then everything is." She reflected inwardly, a faint smile touching her lips. "Because at last, Kutou is at peace."

"There must be a reason behind that smile." Hyoushin observed now, coming across the room towards her as he held out his hands to take her gloved fingers in his. "Are you going to tell me what it is, or am I supposed to guess?"

"I was just thinking how things have changed since we were saving the world with Hikari a year and a half ago, that's all." Despite herself, Myoume pinkened. "How *you've* changed in particular, to be honest. You're not the same man you were then — you're not the tormented soul whose thoughts I invaded time and time again to keep you fighting on. I don't know how to quite explain it, but since we travelled to the place where your parents died, and since you let that part of your life go properly, you've seemed… more at ease. Not just the man of peace who brought tranquillity to Kutou, but also one who'd found it inside of himself too. Is that a silly observation?"

"Not silly… perhaps overly thoughtful." Hyoushin eyed her keenly.

“A lot has happened since I was injured against your brother, after all. We didn’t just visit my parents, Myoume, but your village in the West and then the Meihi settlement in the North. In total we must have travelled for four or five months together, when you stop and think it through. My body was under immense strain, but it has healed and so have I. I have you here now, which I didn’t have before. Lirayi is also by my side, which is something that for so long I believed impossible. I have gone from being a lone tribesman in a court full of doubters to a husband and a brother in a place where people no longer look at me and judge me based solely on my outer appearance. Kutou has changed, Myoume. It is not odd to assume that I would change with it.”

“Mm.” Myoume pursed her lips, brushing her fingers gently against her stomach as she raised her gaze to his. “A husband… and soon to be a father, too. Although I suppose for you that’s not a new sensation, is it? It’s me who’ll be the first time parent. You raised Aoiketsu from when he was small, after all — you already understand the demands of a young child.”

“On the contrary, I don’t believe I am at all prepared.” Hyoushin shook his head ruefully. “Aoiketsu came into my tutelage as a five year old, and I trained him in swordsmanship from that age onwards. True, I watched over him from afar before that time, and I was involved in making decisions regarding his education and his development. But it was quite far removed from being an actual father, Myoume… you give me too much credit for experience I just do not have. This will be an entirely different kind of adventure — and completely new for both of us.”

“An exciting one, however.” Myoume’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. “We’ll be a proper family, then, won’t we?”

“Are we not one now?” Hyoushin looked genuinely surprised, and despite herself, Myoume grinned.

“Of course we are.” She agreed. “But this is the next step. I never thought I’d marry or have children — or that Byakko’s work would ever let me go. And you… you must have felt the same, at times.”

“I had no thoughts about it whatsoever.” Hyoushin admitted. “I was a slave and I lived day by day. Then I was a soldier and I did likewise, on the orders of my Emperor. It is only now I dare look to the future… without fear that it will be somehow snatched away.”

Myoume smiled ruefully.

“Really?” She teased. “Then what was all that fuss about, then,

when I first told you I was pregnant? I seem to remember a certain someone was a little panicked then about the strain on my body…?"

"Well, possibly that's true." Despite himself, Hyoushin looked sheepish. "But it's natural, isn't it, for a man to worry about his wife's well being? You mean a lot to me… and besides, I've calmed down now. You've passed the stage where I worried about your health — its obvious even to me that right now you're as strong and fit as you've ever been and Aishi-sensei has adamantly assured me on many occasions that the child is likewise. So I have ceased to fret — and you should cease to tease me in return."

"All right." Myoume relented. "Should you even be here now, come to think of it? The Emperor doesn't need you right at the moment?"

"Kintsusei-sama is involved in some political discussion with a couple of the noble representatives from the Southern Province." Hyoushin shook his head. "Things are much improved there and slavery has completely been eradicated among those families who still persisted. However, the Emperor and I both felt that it was not necessary for me to be present during these talks. I am a Meihi, after all, and even though things are settling, there is no need to push such matters in their face."

"There's no reason to exclude you." Myoume objected, and Hyoushin shrugged.

"On the contrary, there is every reason." He said levelly. "I have not sat any political examinations and am therefore not qualified to act in such matters. I am a soldier, not a politician, and though Kintsusei-sama often asks for my opinion, I am not formally trained to carry out such delicate procedures. This is no longer a military matter, but a diplomatic one — and in that light, I have no place at that table. I am not offended by the omission, Myoume. It was my own suggestion, to be truthful. With the Southern Province, everything must be done by the book. This is, after all, the region where, twenty years ago, the true blood lord was overthrown and murdered on the orders of Kaiga Gin for trying to prevent the ensnarement of tribesmen into slavery. I will not be the one to upset the proverbial applecart by appearing where I am not welcome."

"I suppose I should have seen that coming. Man of peace, as always." Myoume reflected, and Hyoushin nodded, brushing his fingers against his sword.

"My arm has healed almost completely from the injury Miramu cast across it, and I am once more able to wield my blade." He agreed.

“Whether men of war are needed in Kutou or not I cannot be sure — but I know my position sure enough… and do not ask for more.”

“Your position.” Myoume snorted. “You refer to it as though you were a lowly guardsman. You talk it down, Hyoushin, but you can’t escape your title forever, either in public or in private. You are Kutou’s Shougun, now… appointed by the Emperor himself.”

“Shougun is a title which somehow belongs more easily with another tribal individual.” Hyoushin admitted, reaching up to touch her cheek gently. “That’s all. I still feel Nakago’s spirit somehow lays claim to it… and whatever his flaws it is a huge shadow to try and eclipse.”

“So don’t try and eclipse it.” Myoume advised. “Your own achievements are nothing to be sneered at. Unlike Nakago, you didn’t let revenge or bitterness drive you. You are Shougun, Hyoushin, in spirit and in deed — the man who protects the Emperor, who strives for Kutou’s peace and well-being… as has always been the case in Kutou’s chequered past. So long as there have been Eastern Emperors there have been Eastern officers with great power and influence earned by deeds of loyalty and courage. You are not a weak link in that chain. And when our child is born, he or she will know they have a father they can look up to — just as Aoiketsu did, when he had noone else to turn to.”

“Aoiketsu is a man, now, and an envoy of the Emperor in a foreign land.” Hyoushin said pensively. “He no longer needs my guidance… but I am not disappointed in the person he’s become. Even Nakago would find little to fault in his son, I think… perhaps, to that end, being Shougun is a logical progression after all. But even so, hero or villain, Nakago is a man of legend. His story will be told for countless generations to come… he was, after all, Seiryuu’s chosen.”

“Your own story has done the rounds a few times, and probably will continue to, as time goes on.” Myoume slipped her arms loosely around his shoulders, a twinkle in her indigo eyes. “You underestimate yourself, as usual… but I’m your wife and I won’t let other people underestimate you. Nothing you’ve gained since your return here has been undeserved — either in terms of title, position, property or the regard of your fellows.”

“I suppose when you’ve grown up as a slave, you don’t think that way.” Hyoushin looked abashed. “But at least I have you to correct me, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do.” Myoume offered him an amused smile. “And

speaking of those things, how go the negotiations between Kutou and Sairou for Kintsusei-sama's own wedding arrangements? Are they still progressing? I haven't heard anything fresh of late — I wondered if something had gone wrong."

"Not as far as I'm aware, but communications between the two lands take time." Hyoushin shook his head. "Kutou is as far as it can be from Sairou, which is probably part of the reason Kintsusei-sama has for entering into this arrangement in the first place. It is appropriate for an Emperor to marry another Emperor's daughter, and Ouba-hime is supposedly accomplished and intelligent, if young and un-travelled. She isn't in line in any way to pass the prize of Sairou's throne to an eligible husband, because she has a well-famed older brother with a young son of his own and their existence makes Sairou's royal dynasty already secure. And Sairou and Kutou do not share borders, so it can't be seen as a convenient excuse for invasion by either side. It seems to be a smart diplomatic move, as far as I can see. And to this end, everyone has been working very hard to make it a reality."

"Ouba-hime, huh." Myoume looked thoughtful. "You said young — how young? Younger than me, isn't she?"

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed. "Eighteen summers, I believe. But the age gap between her and Kintsusei-sama is not insurmountable. He is not yet past five and thirty himself, and despite the stress of his reign, he has not aged as some men might."

"True." Myoume pursed her lips. "But…"

"But?"

"For a girl of eighteen to be effectively betrothed to a foreigner almost twice her age… whom she hasn't yet even met… it must be a frightening thing." Myoume said honestly. "You and I know Kutou's Emperor is a kind man — but in Sairou, he's still the son of Shoukitei the tyrant. In order to emphasise his blood right to rule Kutou, that connection can't be avoided. Ouba-hime must be somewhat apprehensive… and I wonder if, in the end, that will speak for the match. It's said, after all, that Heiboutei-heika is very fond of his children."

"He is also known as a wise politician and a shrewd negotiator." Hyoushin settled himself in an empty chair, offering his wife a smile. "And Emperors have to look even at their own blood with equanimity on occasion, Myoume. It was, after all, Heiboutei who first contacted my Lord Emperor with the suggestion of the betrothal. It would be

imprudent for him to withdraw his plans now. No, I believe it will go ahead. Plans are already being laid to have Ouba-hime come here to Kutou, and once she is here, then things will most likely fall into their proper places. Kintsusei-sama has been a bachelor King a long time, and I think he too has apprehensions. But it is his duty, as it will be hers. Both for honour and dynasty. Ouba-hime is born of royal blood just as my Lord Emperor is. They both understand what responsibilities that brings… I do not anticipate any complications."

"You're in favour of this, aren't you?"

"Yes." Hyoushin admitted. "Even though it is a politically arranged match, I am. I fear my Lord is lonely from time to time, and with war no longer on his doorstep, he should turn his attention to the future and stability of Kutou. For his own sake too, though, I wish him to find a companion as live-witted as I have done… I think, from all reports, Ouba-hime may well be someone with whom he can form friendship and respect, if not love."

"To think that you're a romantic at heart, under all that fierce armour." Myoume teased, and Hyoushin looked rueful.

"If I am, you have made me so." He returned neatly. "I am simply a man hoping for my friend's happiness. Is that, then, so unusual?"

"No, I suppose not." Myoume relented. "All right. To be honest, I'll be interested to meet this Princess myself. She's my countrywoman, after all. I grew up under the peace and protection of Heibouteiheika's regime, and even in the towns and villages his name was respected. Poor though areas were — problematic though areas were — he did try to help."

"I confess I did not see much sign of it in Eiroku, when I passed through on my Emperor's business." Hyoushin admitted, and a wry smile touched Myoume's lips.

"Ah. Well. Eiroku is somewhat different." She replied. "Heibouteiheika is a fair and just Emperor who believes in supporting his people. However, he expects their support in return. You probably know, since you've been there, that Eiroku was once a trading town. They made a lot of money out of the jewel trade, back when the Kanin mountains were worth excavating. But they got into bad habits and became involved with smugglers and other things because they spied a pretty profit in the black market."

"Smugglers?" Hyoushin looked surprised. "I had no idea such things operated in a place like Sairou."

“Well, all kinds of things go on among the desert sands.” Myoume said playfully. “Sairou is dry but its people and culture most decidedly are not. The stories do go that originally the smugglers began their operations to help protect the local people from unreasonable taxes during the reign of one of Heiboutei’s predecessors. In fact, I have a personal interest in it… since as far as I know, the last incarnation of Toroki was somehow involved in the gem trade.”

“A fleeting memory of a past life, perhaps?” Hyoushin asked, and Myoume smiled ruefully.

“More a hint of deja-vu.” She replied. “The one past I have never been able to see is my soul’s own.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“In any case, people’s greed persisted even when the need for the vigilante smuggling had long since died.” She continued. “The taxes dropped to reasonable levels yet the smuggling went on and became more and more intrusive into Sairou’s gem trade. The summary is that people in towns like Eiroku got too powerful for their own good and refused to pay various crown taxes. In Eiroku’s own case it became bloody. Ten years ago, during the height of the dispute, a town official was murdered and another bribed off… Heiboutei took it personally.”

“I can imagine that he would.” Hyoushin looked pensive. “Crown revenue is something Emperors take seriously, no matter what their nationality.”

“Exactly.” Myoume agreed. “So Heiboutei withdrew all royal patronage and used his influence to stifle not only the smuggling, but the livelihood of the city as a whole. He wanted to make a point — to Eiroku’s people and to anyone else who was tempted to cross his path.”

She shrugged.

“He’s a ruthless man as well as a kind one — depending on whether or not you follow his favour. He doesn’t kill unnecessarily — rather he finds other ways to punish those who choose to cross him. I saw his men come often to Shouki-mura and other villages thereabouts when I was a child, bringing water when there was none, or even medical supplies to sick children in the remotest mountain villages. If there was a bad harvest, we all knew that the Imperial men would be in a local city, providing support and handouts for those areas where crops had failed. But towns like Eiroku — towns that sought to defy him — to these he sent no aid. And so Eiroku descended into what you saw when you were there… a city of misery beneath Sairou’s sky. It isn’t

the only town like it — yet it's an effective strategy. Those places nearby see with their own eyes what will happen if they lose Heiboutei's favour… and so they don't offer any resistance to Imperial will. He's known to be a very intelligent politician, when all's said and done."

"A kind man and yet a ruthless man." Hyoushin repeated thoughtfully. "As many Emperors must, he has two faces when dealing with his people."

"Yes." Myoume agreed. "As many Emperors must."

She eyed him quizzically.

"Do you fault him for that? Or respect him?"

"Both, perhaps." Hyoushin admitted. "But it makes me wonder… that such a man offers his daughter to my Emperor. What kind of girl is she, and what is it he hopes to gain from the connection? Trade, most certainly. To protect those people he cares to protect, he no doubt hopes to import supplies from a land where water is plentiful and crops grow in abundance. I wonder if it is only that… this may yet be an enticing political alliance."

"And you say you're not interested in the diplomatic side of things." Myoume scolded. "What happened to being 'just a military officer'?"

"Kintsusei-sama's safety is and has always been my prime concern." Hyoushin said evenly. "Anything which could possibly affect that is something in which I have an interest. It doesn't hurt, after all, to know about the visitors who will soon be among us. I wish for it all to go smoothly… I do not want the connection to fail. But I wish to be aware of all factors, just in case. Such is a bodyguard's duty, Myoume — as Shougun, what else can I do but that?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Myoume acknowledged. "Well, my personal feeling is that Heiboutei-heika knows that sending his daughter to a foreign Emperor's court is not without risks or benefits. But I think he feels the benefits for Sairou will outweigh the risks — and I think he's probably right. I don't think Sairou's people will cause Kutou harm, Hyoushin. But I may be biased… since I have Western blood."

"Even so, I'll take your biased opinion." Hyoushin grinned at her. "It is still an informed opinion and one in which I find some comfort."

"The Princess is definitely likely to come, then?"

"All but certain, now." Hyoushin agreed. "It will take her some days to cross the lands to reach us — but yes. Ouba-hime will most

likely come."

"Then I'll look forward to it." Myoume decided. "And to greeting the daughter of my own Emperor with Byakko's grace, if Kintsusei-sama allows it."

"I think he'll probably even ask something like that of you, considering the conflict in faith." Hyoushin assured her. "For Ouba-hime, it will no doubt be a comfort to know that Byakko's prophet is close at hand."

"I don't know if she needs to see me as Byakko's prophet. Not now." Myoume laughed, shaking her head as she held her hand up before her face. "But I don't mind her knowing I'm from Sairou. If I can help her, after all, I will… you have my word, Hyoushin. Your duty is to serve your Emperor — mine is to help my husband. And besides, I'm looking forward to meeting her. I've heard much about Ouba-hime of Sairou — I'd like to know what kind of a person she really is."

"Father, I'm begging you to reconsider."

The tall, well-featured young man paced across the study, turning to face the man who sat impassively behind his desk, his hands folded on the polished wood as he listened to his companion's tirade in silence. "She's just a child… we both know she's just a child. To send her so far away… and to the son of that man… Father, why would you even entertain doing such a thing? What kind of benefit is there to selling your daughter into slavery like this? Don't you know how frightened she is? Everyone in Sairou is familiar with Shoukitei's ill-famed legend. And despite that you are willing to send your most precious daughter into Seiryuu's land — for good?"

"You seem in high-tempered form this morning, Nefuru."

At length the older man spoke, his tones even and measured as he raised his dark indigo eyes to meet his son's anxious ones. "It isn't like you to forget your manners when addressing me, even in a private conference such as this. You surprise me — it isn't like you at all."

"Father…" The young man faltered for a moment, then flushed red, dropping to his knees as he bowed his head before his companion. "My Lord Emperor, forgive my impertinence. I realise that I'm speaking plainly and that, even as your son, it is not seemly that I do so before Sairou's Lord and Sovereign. But even so, it's not something about which I can stay silent. This is Ouba's future, my Lord. Her whole life… I don't understand how you can discard her so easily into

the enemy's clutches without even a shred of regret!"

"Calm yourself, my boy." Heiboutei shook his head, getting to his feet as he approached the still crouched young man. He held out a hand to brush the other's shoulder, a faint smile touching his lips as he spoke.

"I would have you stand before me and meet my gaze. We are, as I said, alone. And you obviously find many things to fault in my decision, which is why you choose to come before me like this in such a way."

He paused, then spread his hands.

"I will not pretend to you, my son and heir, that I lack misgivings." He admitted. "Ouba is as dear to me as you are — and as you two are to one another. Of all my children, you two are my jewels — this you know without my saying so. This is not to do with my affection for either of you. It is simply a matter of Imperial politics."

"But…" Nefuru hesitated, standing slowly as he took a deep breath into his lungs. "I'm sorry, Father. I've been rude without meaning to be, and it isn't like me to be so incautious, even in the privacy of your study. But I find it hard to remain calm and reasoned when it comes to something like this."

He bit his lip.

"I am sensible to the duties of an Emperor." He continued more calmly now, gaining control of his emotions as his father stood back, allowing him to speak. "I am also wise to the fact that for Ouba's own benefit she needs to find a husband of status and wealth who can maintain her own bloodline without tarnishing her or our honour. I am not so naïve as to not understand. But my Lord, to wed her to *Shoukitei's* son? To the kin of the man who ruled Kutou through blood and fear? This is what I do not understand. Of all people, of all royal courts… why this one?"

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Had you suggested that Ouba be betrothed to the Southern Emperor, I would feel entirely differently." He added. "Reizeitei-sama is of peaceful mind and descent, and of her own age, more or less. Kounan is a country with which Sairou has had good political dealings for many generations — they are almost brothers in arms, and even our divine Chosen became allies in times of great need. But Shoukitei's son, the Emperor of a land which until very recently was mired in genocide and civil war… this is what dismays me. A land which

treated Western tribes such as the Hin to such indiscriminate slaughter and persecution… Ouba may be a Princess, but she is still of Western blood. She is not of Kutou's people. What kind of treatment do you think may await her if she should enter such a land?"

"I believe that Ouba will have everything an Imperial consort needs, if she goes to Kutou." Heiboutei said mildly, and Nefuru frowned, fighting the urge to bang his fists down on his father's desk in his frustration.

"But Father! *Shoukitei*'s family!"

For a moment, Heiboutei did not answer. Then, slowly, he raised his gaze to his son's, and Nefuru swallowed hard, reading the glitter of Imperial will in the depths of his father's distinctive Western eyes.

"You are my son, Nefuru." He said softly, his words barely above a whisper yet somehow audible even amid the noise and bustle of every day life going on somewhere outside the study's heavy oaken doors. "One day, you will sit on the throne of Sairou. One day, you will rule as Emperor and your people will bow to you. This thought makes me proud — that I have sired such a son who already has excelled in so many ways before the people who will one day crown him."

"I don't understand." At his father's change in tack, Nefuru faltered, his frustration fading as he struggled to ascertain his companion's motives. "What do you mean, Father? Why are you talking about me? This is about Ouba's betrothal — isn't it?"

"You are my son, and you will be a fine Emperor." Heiboutei continued calmly, as if his son had not spoken. "But even if you are so, you will not be the same Emperor as I am now. Whether my reign be good or bad in the end is something Byakko will adjudge after I am gone. You will not reign like me, although you may have learnt things from me. I trust you have, considering your quick wits."

He sighed, sinking back down into his empty seat.

"Even so… you will be your own kind of Emperor." He concluded. "We are not our fathers, Nefuru. You are not me. And Kintsusei of Kutou is not Shoukitei."

Nefuru hesitated for a moment, digesting this. Then he bowed his head.

"But you said yourself that I have learnt from you." He said slowly. "And I will emulate your achievements and build on them to form my own, Father. In this light, surely… the connection between Father and son is irrefutable?"

“I suppose that depends on the father and on the son.” Heiboutei offered a faint smile. “You are cognisant of Sairou’s history, Nefuru. You know what demons exist in our family’s past, as well as those who lived in other lands. We may not publicise those records — indeed, nowadays, there are probably few who even know her name, let alone speak it. But you — and I, and Ouba too — we are all descendants of that one… that demon in Sairou’s past whose existence is still a taint on our clan’s ancestry even now. In light of that, do we have the right to pre-judge Kintsusei? I think not.”

Nefuru’s cheeks reddened at this gentle rebuke, and he sighed, running his fingers through his long hair.

“I understand what you are saying.” He said heavily. “I am just worried for my sister. I do not know this Kintsusei. I have not met him, and I know scant little information about him. Doubtless my Lord Father knows more than I do — or you would not be able to rest calm at the thought of sending a girl of just turned eighteen to the other ends of the world?”

“As Emperor, that is my duty.” Heiboutei agreed gently. “Yes, my son. I know a little more than you. It is true that Kintsusei of Kutou is the only surviving blood relation of the tyrant Shoukitei, the previous Emperor who allowed slavery and persecution of minority groups across the Eastern lands and plunged his country into civil conflict. But Kutou is no longer at war. For the first time in a long time it has been possible for me to send envoys to the East without fear for their lives — and they have sent many reports back to me on this Eastern King. He does not take an Imperial name because he was raised a soldier, not a man of his father’s debauched court. He has fought in the past twelve months to repeal the laws regarding tribal minorities being barred from Kutou’s politics, and has sought to secure the freedom of every slave still in bonds in the East. And, perhaps most significantly of all, his most trusted ally and highest ranking military official within his court is not a member of Kutou’s influential noble class, but a tribal born Meihi from the northern borderlands — a man who was once a slave himself, before Kintsusei freed him by his own hand.”

He smiled.

“Do you think such a man will harm our Ouba?” He asked gently. “I do not. I believe Kintsusei is fighting to erase the scars his father clawed across Kutou’s landscape. From all accounts, he has no loyalty to his father’s memory, and was involved in the military clash that sought to eradicate Shoukitei’s stranglehold on Eastern power twenty

years ago. I think he is an interesting man, this Emperor. And I would like to form a closer alliance with him. So, when it came to my ears that he was beginning to seek a consort, I offered him my daughter's hand in marriage. Was that reckless, Nefuru? To take such a gamble, not having spoken to the man direct?"

Nefuru sighed heavily.

"I cannot criticise my Emperor's judgement." He said carefully, and Heiboutei smiled.

"Your father's, then? Will you tell me whether, as a father, I have done Ouba a wrong?" He asked softly.

Slowly Nefuru shook his head.

"These things, if true, may mean he is not the kind of man his father was." He admitted unwillingly. "And just as we should not be judged based on the demons in our past, nor should he on his. I am sorry, my Lord. To question an Emperor in any respect could be seen as treason — and I was rude beyond my remit. I suppose I have just always sought to protect Ouba — and knowing that the idea of going so far away troubles her, I…"

"I want your support in this, Nefuru." Heiboutei said gravely, all humour gone from his gaze as he eyed his companion solemnly. "Ouba trusts you, and I need her to leave here with a settled mind. I will not retract my offer to the Eastern King, and bring dishonour down on any of our heads. The only way this agreement can now be broken is if Kintsusei for some reason decides against it once Ouba has reached Kutou. We pray such a thing will not happen — for the sake of her honour and ours, I wish her to make the best impression she can. If she goes with worries and doubts, she may give a poor account of herself in this foreign place. So for her sake, Nefuru, please… I need you to side with me and convince her to hold her head up high. Kutou has much it can offer us, if trade by sea can once more be opened between our two lands. Many people who live in poverty may yet improve their standard of living with the commerce such an agreement will generate. For their sake, Ouba is a pawn and a commodity, and I regret that. But as a Princess, it is also her duty to be such. We serve our people, we do not own them. You know that. We are here for their sake, so long as they are here for ours. This is just another stage in that duty… personal feelings cannot be allowed to intervene."

Nefuru paused for a moment, then bowed once more before his father.

“I don’t like it.” He admitted. “But I cannot fault my Lord’s reasoning on any count. Our honour as a family and our duty to our people must outweigh my own selfish doubts and fears. I am sorry, Heika. Forgive me for acting irrationally without considering the greater good of Sairou.”

“You are still young yourself.” Heiboutei assured him. “And you seek to protect one you love. This isn’t something you need apologise for.”

“Then… may I ask one selfish request?” Nefuru eyed his father hesitantly, and Heiboutei smiled, gesturing for him to continue.

“Voice it, my son. I would hear it.”

“When Ouba leaves, I’d like to send one of my retinue with her, to ensure her safety on the long journey.” Nefuru said quietly. “With your blessing, Father, I would like to send Sayo to the East as her escort. As my men go, he is the one most suited to long treks across desert sand and foreign principalities, considering how wide-ranging his jobs have been over the years. If he were to take Ouba to the gates of Kutou’s palace I would feel more assured on her safe arrival.”

“I see no reason to refuse, if you are sure you can manage without Sayo here.” Heiboutei nodded. “In fact, it suits my line of thought well. I had been debating who to release for such a task. You are right that Sayo is probably the most experienced person for this kind of a journey. More so, he is loyal to the death to you and to Rouhei — which means we need have no concerns over his taking the task seriously.”

“Thank you.” Nefuru looked relieved. “At least then I know I can trust in her reaching her destination unmolested.”

“Further to that end, Nefuru, I have already spoken to Rouhei about sending Kinka as well.”

“Kinka?” Nefuru’s eyes widened in surprise. “But…”

“I know.” Heiboutei agreed wryly. “It is a gamble in some regards. But even so I think it wise. Ouba is fond of her, and she will need a lady in waiting to see to her needs in Kutou. Better it be a fellow countrywoman, at least until she is better integrated into Kutou’s society. Kinka is a deft, able young lady. I think it well to send her.”

Nefuru looked thoughtful for a moment. Then,

“And Rouhei has agreed it also?”

“Yes. He too thinks it best that when Ouba leaves the palace, Kinka

is with her."

"Then I will raise no objection." Nefuru decided. "If her guardian consents, I have no right to say anything to the contrary."

"But your hesitations exist?" Heiboutei eyed his son quizzically, and Nefuru nodded.

"Kei Engai was apprehended in the East." He said softly. "I wonder how long their memories run, that is all. Kinka has grown to resemble her father a good deal… if they should make that connection it could cause complications for everyone."

"But as you are not me, Nefuru, Kinka is not Engai." Heiboutei said comfortably. "I don't doubt her loyalty. Are you saying you do?"

"Not at all." Nefuru shook his head. "But there's no telling how the Easterners might see it."

"Engai was our problem to deal with and we did. It was a long time ago and it has no bearing on the current political situation." Heiboutei pointed out. "No, I think it will be well to send her. As I said, a gamble — but one I think I must make for the sake of my daughter."

His gaze softened.

"Ouba will go to the East." He said quietly. "As her name implies, she will be the flower of their court… of this I have no doubt. I will miss her, as will you, and her mother also. And to begin with she will miss us also — quite badly, I imagine, considering the sheltered nature of her life so far. But this is the beginning of Ouba's future, Nefuru. You called her a child, but she no longer is. At eighteen, many women are married. Some even have children of their own. With Byakko's blessing, Ouba will soon be following the same path. I have great faith in her, Nefuru. As I do in you."

He reached out to touch his son's fingers.

"My two jewels will both shine brightly, I have no doubt." He said simply. "One of them in the Eastern sky, and one here, in the West."

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

“Well, a lot of progress I seem to be making.”

In the recesses of the palace library, the alcove’s sole occupant closed her book with a snap, uttering a heavy sigh as she rested her chin in her hands. On the desk beside it stood a quill and brush, and the several scraps of torn parchment scattered around her working place indicated that the girl’s studies had not gone according to plan. With a resigned grimace, she cast her gaze over the one remaining undamaged sheet, eying critically the list of wobbly kanji that tracked down the page like footprints in the ink.

“Academic stuff is still not my strong point.” She mused ruefully aloud. “Even after a year and a half I still can’t get it into my head.”

To anyone just passing by, the young woman who sat at the desk was nothing out of the ordinary. Despite the fine robes she wore, there was nothing distinctive in her appearance or bearing that indicated that she was anything more than just another noble daughter killing time in the palace archives as she waited for her menfolk to finish their business with the Emperor. She was by no means unattractive, although she was some way from being beautiful, and her features gave her more the appearance of niceness than they shouted femme fatale. Thick dark hair fell over her shoulders and down her back, cast up in the style currently in fashion for women of means in the South, yet unlike some of the more showy ladies of Kounan’s court, her fingers were not clustered with gems, and indeed the only jewellery she wore was a silver chain at her throat on which hung an unusual looking ring. Her clothes were in line with court fashion, although muted down below the more flashy styles favoured by many rich young women, and she was neither tall nor short, fat nor thin — an average girl dressed in average court couture.

And yet, deep in the girl’s hazel eyes sparkled something that set her apart from all the other young women in Kounan’s busy Royal court. She was, to everyone who met her, an enigma — yet the stories had flown far and wide as to this girl’s deeds and her story had spread across all the four lands. This was Sukunami Hikari, once Seiryuu no Miko, once the girl who had raised four Gods over the Eastern skies to bring peace and brotherhood to the nations that lay below. And more,

this was the girl whom Suzaku no Miko had blessed as her holy treasure — the Shinzahou which, even now marked her out as the most significant spiritual force within the ShijinTenchishou. Her past was a mystery to many and her presence incalculable — yet although she seemed nothing unusual, everyone at Kounan's court knew that within Hikari's heart beat the power of the Phoenix God.

And yet, as she mused ruefully, all the divine power in the world didn't seem to be able to help her memorise her kanji.

"Even though Chichiri gave me some tips last time I was in the village, I'm still reversing my radicals." She murmured, unaware that she was talking to herself as she reached for the brush once more. "I swear, sometimes I wish I was back at school. At least there there was a limit on how many of these things I had to know."

"You seem somewhat troubled this morning, Hikari."

A voice made her glance up, surprise in her gaze as she met the questioning eyes of Kounan's young Emperor.

Reizeitei had been King of Kounan all his life, although he had only reigned in his own name alone for the past five or so. Now twenty, competition and pressure for his hand in marriage had intensified a hundred-fold, and with good reason, for Reizeitei had inherited all of the handsome looks and good manners of his legendary father Saihitei. Hikari knew better than anyone that Reizeitei's habit for formality and dignity concealed a mischievous sense of humour, and in the year and a half since she had made her home in the Southern lands, she had begun to develop a close friendship with the young King. Reizeitei was the only person at court who dared call her simply "Hikari", after all — to most these days she was "Hikari-hime", and to some degrees she had come to understand the pressure on the young King. For this reason, the two had struck up an amitie, and it was not uncommon for one to seek the other out during a quiet moment at court.

Even now, it was clear that the Emperor's morning hearings had only just finished, Hikari mused, for the Emperor was robed in his usual official finery. However, Reizeitei's long dark hair was tied back in a loose tail that fell carelessly over his shoulders, and as she set her brush down, he offered her a smile, crossing the library to join her.

"Your hands are covered in ink, so I imagine you must have been studying." He observed, glancing from her black-blotched fingers to the parchment that lay before her. "I must admire your industry."

"Not really." Hikari sighed, shaking her head. "I mean, it's so

confusing. I was never much good at school stuff in my own world, Heika. If I had to write a report or something, I'd even rely on the computer sometimes to pick the right characters for me — if I wasn't sure. I always found this stuff hard to remember… and writing in Kounan involves so many more letters than in Tokyo. No matter how long I study them for, I'm sure I'm never going to manage to remember them all."

"Computer?" Reizeitei looked confused, and Hikari reddened.

"Nothing." She said, dismissing it with a flick of her fingers. "Just something we had in the Miko's world, to help us to write and study."

"I see." Reizeitei looked thoughtful. "And there is nothing here that might provide a facsimile?"

"No." Hikari shook her head. "Nothing except my brain — which really doesn't work as well as it could."

Reizeitei laughed, a twinkle of amusement entering his golden eyes.

"Nevertheless, I'm glad you come here to learn." He admitted. "You say things I don't expect to hear, but you are honest with your feelings and it refreshes me. Chichiri was right when he said you and I might benefit from one another's company."

"I suppose so." Hikari looked startled. "I don't see how my fudging kanji helps you at all, to be honest, Heika. But even so…"

"It's not that." Reizeitei shook his head, sinking down into the seat opposite as he rested his chin in his hands. For a moment he seemed like an ordinary young man, his gaze earnest and open, and despite herself Hikari returned his smile. "You are very normal with me, and I like that. At court, men obey me and look to me for favour. Women gather with the hope of being the next Empress and siring a future King. These things are necessary and I accept them. But I do not treasure them. Loyalty is important but friendship is something I find more pleasant. I've had few people to call friends during my life — but I should hope to think that I can now number you among that few."

"I think so." Hikari dimpled. "You've been good to me — and I like it when we can have conversations like this. When there's noone else around. Besides, I sort of understand. Being Shinzahou and all…"

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"People expect to see some divine priestess or Goddess or something." She said ruefully. "And I don't really fit the bill. Yet they

still treat me like I'm different, and it's hard to get my head around. In that way we're both the same, Heika. Which is why we can talk."

"I suppose so." Reizeitei looked surprised, then he smiled, nodding. "Of all the people at court, Hikari, you probably do understand the best what it is like to be revered."

"You seem more at ease when it's just the two of us like this and it's easier to talk to you this way than it is when you're in the robes of state and giving orders." Hikari observed.

"When I am Boushin, in fact, and not Reizeitei." Reizeitei nodded his head. "I think it was the same for my father. I still like it, you know, when Chichiri forgets protocol and calls me by that name. My real self has been swallowed up by my Imperial self, so it's nice to know that some people still remember."

He glanced over at her parchment, pulling it towards him as he scanned over her writing.

"You find it hard to write with a brush, don't you, Hikari?"

"You'd think, considering all the stuff I did at school, I'd have it down." Hikari groaned. "But yes. It doesn't make it any easier to be neat."

"Perhaps I can ask for them to craft you some finer brushes to use for your writing." Reizeitei reflected. "If you'd like me to, I will enquire."

"It might help my scrawl." Hikari reflected. "So it's worth a try… but… remembering them is harder than writing them."

"That's just time and practice." Reizeitei said sensibly. "Although when I was first learning to write, my tutors taught me many patterns and memory aids to help me absorb things quickly. You must have had those in your world too, I'm sure?"

"Yes, but I guess I was a really awful student." Hikari rubbed her temples. "Radicals and stuff — but I don't think I learnt more than half of them in their proper places. And I never went to High School, so I never finished learning the hardest ones."

"You have ink all over your brow now." Reizeitei's handsome features broke into a mischievous smile as he reached across to touch her forehead. "You really are a hopeless case, aren't you, Hikari-chan?"

"Guess so." Hikari looked rueful. "I guess that means I'll need to wash more than just my hands when I'm done. Oh well. At least Aoi

isn't here to see it."

"He will be back soon, though, with any luck."

Reizeitei cast her an interested look, and despite herself Hikari blushed, her fingers going to the ring that hung at her throat.

"It's been almost six months now, since he came to Kounan to serve at your court for Kintsusei-sama." She murmured. "And even though he is based here, he still has to ride from Eiyou a fair bit to meet with people in other provinces. But at least he is here, and that's the important thing. When he's away, he's never away for more than a few days. It's just hard, when he is."

"You and he have grown closer in recent months." Reizeitei observed. "Soon you will be discussing when to formalise your connection, won't you?"

He grimaced.

"Perhaps then my aides will stop hinting and flustering about the amount of time I seem to spend in your company of late. Since you began spending weekdays within the palace, and boarding in the guest rooms to save your travelling, I have had more than one of my associates ask me whether or not you are a candidate to become my consort."

"*Me*?" Hikari stared, and Reizeitei nodded.

"I have made it clear to them on several occasions that you are promised to another, and that I have no intention of interfering in that fact." He said hurriedly. "But they are men desperate for me to find a consort. And as such, they will look wherever they can. You are Suzaku no Shinzahou, the child of a Miko and a Seishi. They like your bloodline, so if they could, they'd betroth us tomorrow."

"You know, Aoi did once ask me if he'd have to ride out to the palace to fight you for my hand." Hikari said thoughtfully. "Maybe he was more right than he thought. At least, if your advisors had their way."

"To me you are a friend — well, more like the sister I do not have — and I would not jeopardise that." Reizeitei assured her. "Fond as I am of you, it is a platonic fondness, so you need not worry about my own harboured intentions. It is an irritation and an amusement that such links are being made — but I wanted you aware of them so that you — and Aoiketsu — know they are not my work."

"It's all right. I think by now I know you better than that." Hikari

grinned. “Although it’s sort of flattering that they want me to be an Empress. In my world, that would never have happened. Here I’m only seventeen but I already have a… well, a man who I hope to marry when I turn eighteen, unless something drastically changes in the meantime. And then I suppose I’ll be permanently at your court, won’t I? Instead of just during the week. If my husband… Yeesh, my *husband*… is an ambassador of Kintsusei-sama of Kutou.”

“That aside, Hikari, I hope you’ll often be here.” Reizeitei said frankly. “I never had a sister or a brother — my mother was a widow before I took my first breath, and I have often regretted that fact. Brothers in Imperial families can be blessings or curses, but a sister would not have provided political competition and I… I would have liked not to have grown up so alone. Now I have you, and you are Suzaku’s by blood, just as I am. In that respect, I think of you as my sister, and I encourage my councillors to do likewise even though it’s not officially the case. So whether you married Aoiketsu or not in a year’s time — I’d hope that you’ll stay close to Eiyou as time goes on.”

“I’m acclimatising to Kounan being my home, now.” Hikari looked thoughtful. “I miss a lot of things, still, but I’ve gained a lot, too. I think that’s part of growing up anyway — gaining and losing things, people, situations… learning to adapt and moving on with life. So I don’t suppose that will change too much. I’m only just seventeen now — I have a lot of life still to look forward to. And if I have to stay in the ShijinTenchishou, I want to be in Kounan — near the people who are dear to me.”

“Does that include me?”

“You know it does, so don’t tease me.” Hikari scolded, and Reizeitei laughed.

“Then maybe you might start to call me Oniisama.” He bantered back. “If it so suited you, Hikari-*hime*.”

His eyes twinkled with mischief as he used the favoured court honorific, and Hikari grimaced in his direction.

“Well, I suppose that if I did, they’d stop talking about us getting married.” She retorted. “Your aides have no idea what a mischievous sense of humour you have under all that formal niceness, you know. I wonder if your father was as much trouble as you are, Reizeitei-sama… or whether it’s just something that’s all your own.”

“I don’t know.” Reizeitei looked pensive. “Though I have told you not to call me that when we’re in private, and you’re wilfully ignoring me. You are just as wicked as I am, you know.”

“Well, then you have a small problem, don’t you?” Hikari’s eyes twinkled. “As Boushin-niisama, you can’t give me orders to call you what name you like, so I’m free to do as I choose. You can only give me Imperial commands as Reizeitei-sama, and in that case, I have to remember my court manners — don’t I?”

Reizeitei stared at her for a moment. Then he grinned.

“You win.” He acknowledged, holding up his hands. ‘Tasuki-san always says never enter a challenge with a girl and he’s right. But it’s nice to have someone who speaks to me the way you do, nonetheless. All teasing aside, Hikari — I would not object to you calling me “Boushin’ when we are in private… and nor would I feel affronted or insulted if you called me Oniisama from time to time. Truly, as I said, it would be rather nice.”

Hikari pursed her lips.

“Maybe.” She acknowledged at length. “If I remember. See, you’ve always been Reizeitei-sama to me… because that’s how Chichiri introduced you to me. But it doesn’t mean, if I use that, that I’m trying to put space between us. We are friends, I promise we are. Since I first began tuition here a year or so ago, I’ve come to know you pretty well, after all. You’ve done a lot of things for me and even made me welcome within your palace while your people try to pound information into my thick skull. You don’t need to think any other way… a name is just a name, after all. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Reizeitei inclined his head. He eyed her for a moment, then smiled, getting to his feet.

“For now, leave your studies.” He suggested. “Come walk with me in the grounds. In truth, I have a favour to ask of you — our meeting this morning was not entirely coincidence. As it happens, I have no pressing engagements this afternoon — and I would like it, if you have none yourself, if we could talk.”

“I thought we were already talking, but all right.” Hikari looked non-plussed, but she nodded her head, getting to her feet. “I’m getting nowhere with my writing today, anyway, so I might as well clear my head.”

“I’ll help you with the Kanji myself, if you help me in return.” Reizeitei offered, and Hikari raised an eyebrow.

“This is a big favour, then, is it?” She asked warily. “One which I may find hard to do?”

“I hope not.” Reizeitei sighed. “Come. The library is not a place for

such conversations, and the sakura is blooming in the grounds beyond. It is much more pleasant there, towards the stream, than cooped up in this place."

"No arguments here." Hikari pushed her work implements to one side, nodding her head. "Lead the way, Heika… I'm right with you."

As they stepped out into the spring sunlight, Reizeitei pursed his lips, shooting his companion a sidelong glance.

"The truth is that I am being much badgered about this question of a suitor." He said slowly. "And it would be to both of our benefits for such a matter to be resolved soon. However, I am not comfortable with the idea of using women — any women — as simple tools to further my succession. Even thinking of such a thing… makes me uncomfortable."

"Okay, but how does this involve me?" Hikari looked quizzical, and Reizeitei smiled.

"I will soon have my people send out the call to the country as a whole to send their daughters to the palace, as happened in my Father's day." He said evenly. "But in truth, I seek only one consort — not many. I will have my sons born of the same woman, and with luck instil in them loyalty to one another in protecting Kounan's peace above all other things. I wish to find this woman, Hikari, but I also wish to be fond of her, as my Father was of my mother."

He sighed.

"To love her as a soul-mate is probably too much for an Emperor to ask." He said pragmatically. "To share the bond you and Aoiketsu have would be nice, but realistically I do not expect it. Yet I wish her to be a friend and a confidant — a person in whom I can find good company, not just a mother for my children."

"This all makes sense, but I still don't understand how you need my help." Hikari frowned. "You're going to have to explain a little more clearly, Heika."

"Quite simply, you are a woman, and I am not." Reizeitei said frankly. "And women will speak to women when they will not speak to men. Girls will be taken from their homes and families to come here… I do not wish to create any unhappiness in choosing my consort, because it will create bitterness in the years to come. So I hope… I hope that when they come, I can trust you to help bridge the gap between my position and theirs. When a harem is in situe, there are places male aides cannot go, and things that cannot be said

directly to an Emperor due to the rules of courtesy. Therefore I may rely on you, Hikari, as my go-between — will you be willing to help me, if such a situation arose?"

"To be your harem messenger?" Hikari eyed him for a moment, then she smiled. "I suppose so. Some of them might even be my age, after all — and there are too many men at this court already. It will be nice, if there are some girls too."

"Thank you." Relief crossed Reizeitei's golden eyes. "I appreciate it, Hikari. And I will keep my word to you, also — about your writing. I do not know what kind of tutor I would make, but I do know a lot of characters and I would like to help you if I can."

"You and Aoi are both a lot smarter than me." Hikari said honestly. "But it's frustrating when you have to get someone to help you read things. So I'd like to learn. If you don't mind… I think I need all the coaching I can get, and Aoi isn't always here to ask."

She sighed.

"And even when he is, he's often busy." She added. "He's never too busy to see me, but I don't want all our time spent together to involve tuition."

"Naturally." Reizeitei's eyes twinkled with mischief, and Hikari pinkened again, swiping the Emperor's arm playfully.

"Stop it." She warned. "King or not, that doesn't give you the right to tease me so much."

"But I've never had someone who I could tease." Reizeitei pointed out to her. "As I said, no siblings, and court friends are not the same. You are the only one there is, Hikari — so I'm afraid you will have to bear the brunt of it."

"I guess." Hikari sighed, shaking her head in resignation. "All right, if it makes you happy. But why all the harem talk all of a sudden, anyway? I know you need to marry — and I understand all of that. But nothing's been said in a while and now suddenly you seem all interested in it again. Are you going to send messengers out that soon?"

Reizeitei pursed his lips, sending her a sidelong glance. He nodded slowly.

"My councillors are having kittens about it of late." He confessed. "Since they discovered that Princess Ouba of Sairou is to be formally betrothed to the Emperor Kintsusei of Kutou."

“I don’t see why they’d mind about that.” Hikari looked confused. “It’s Sairou and Kutou, not Kounan. Besides, Kintsusei-sama is a nice man, and he’s a lot older than you are. If he leaves it too much longer won’t he find it more difficult to find a wife?”

“An Emperor can always find a wife.” Reizeitei said drolly. “A suitable one, however… now that takes time.”

“Even so…”

“Sairou and Kounan have been allies for a long time.” Reizeitei explained. “Conversely, Kutou are only now rebuilding links with countries they had not had good trade with during their civil war. My councillors think it concerning, therefore, that Sairou’s Emperor offered his favourite daughter to Kutou and not to Kounan.”

“And you?” Hikari looked startled. “Do you feel slighted by it?”

“Actually, I’m relieved.” Reizeitei said frankly. Hikari stared.

“Relieved?”

“I don’t want to marry someone of royal blood if I can help it.” Reizeitei explained. “Kounan borders Sairou, and as I said, we are allies. But if that were to change… I don’t want my heirs being confused about their loyalties. Ouba-hime is of good blood — very good blood. And in a nation like Kutou, where there is no connecting border and where things are so different… the match is a good one. I would not like to have Heiboutei-heika as a father in law. A king overseeing another king… I don’t think I’d like that at all.”

“I see.” Hikari’s expression became thoughtful. “It really is complicated, isn’t it?”

“Horrendously so.” Reizeitei agreed. “But in any case, it is the tradition of Kounan for an Emperor to choose his consort from his own people. My mother was not a noble-born Princess, yet she has become a great Dowager Empress. That is what I seek for my consort, too. To have someone as strong and as brave as my mother at my side. Regardless of their blood — I will choose them based on their character, if I possibly can. My father believed in it and so do I. Kounan does not need to buy peace with its neighbours. It already has it, after all.”

“So you’ll send out messengers across Kounan then.”

“I will, and soon.” Reizeitei confirmed. “In the meantime, we must do everything we can to convince my Council that there is no chance of my marrying you.”

“Definitely.” Hikari laughed. “I don’t want to see two people I care about lash swords at one another over my honour.”

“It would be an unfortunate repeat of history, in any case.” Reizeitei’s eyes flickered for a moment. “Nakago and Hotohori… Aoiketsu and myself. I have come to disassociate your Aoi from his murderous father, Hikari… I do not seek to create such an uncomfortable return to the past.”

“Me either.” Hikari agreed. “Aoi is Aoi and you’re you. Nakago and Hotohori-sama are both dead. And I came to this world to help bury the hatchet, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Reizeitei agreed. “And I’m glad of it. More glad too that you stayed here.”

He smiled.

“Well, my sister of Suzaku?” He said playfully. “Shall we return to your Kanji? I have a little time and if an Emperor cannot teach you, I wonder who can!”

As the sun began to set over the city of Tokyo, in the big National Library the many clusters of students that had gathered in corners to finish their homework began to pack up their books and papers, swinging bags over their shoulders as they headed out into the dusk light. For them, the evening’s slog was over and now they could enjoy themselves in the bustling city, free of any nagging obligations.

In the furthermost corner of the history department, however, a sole figure sat hunched over her desk, books cast haphazardly around her as she focused her attention on the pages in front of her. Lost in her own world, she did not hear the footsteps of another approaching her until he put his hand on her shoulder, making her jump and let out an exclamation of surprise.

“Keisuke-san!”

“Are you still here?” At her reaction, the newcomer laughed, amusement sparkling in his dark eyes. “I thought your shift finished at seven, Arina-chan. It’s almost half past eight… won’t your family be worried?”

The girl shook her head, pushing her book back as she gestured for the older man to join her.

“Dad’s away on business in America this week, and Mother decided to spend her week’s leave visiting her sister in Hokkaido.” She replied

simply. “The house is empty, so noone’s going to bother about me being there or not. Besides, even though I’ve finished working for the day, I had something I wanted to look up. I figured I might as well do it now — since I’m here and all.”

She smiled.

“What about you, Keisuke-san?” She asked. “I would have thought that you’d have headed home after work… why are you at the library?”

“Looking for you, in truth.” Keisuke admitted. “I tried calling your house but got no answer… so I guessed you might still be lurking round the Library. It’s becoming an obsession with you these last few months, you know — I don’t think your own parents would recognise you if they stopped and looked more closely.”

“I doubt they remember my name most of the time.” Arina snorted. “Besides, since Hikari went to that place, I’ve been resolved to find out as much as I can about it. Whether I can find a way to bring her back, or… I don’t know. A doorway into that world or whatever. I decided that I wasn’t going to give up easily. Hi-chan is my best friend and I miss her. So I had to do something… even if it is hopeless.”

“I know.” Despite himself, Keisuke’s expression softened. “I do get it, you know. Hikari’s my niece, after all. I’ve seen Taka and Miaka’s suffering as much as anything else, too. They’ve accepted it and gone forwards for Makoto’s sake, but it’s still a hole in their lives and ours, too. Your sentiments aren’t strange, Arina-chan. But you shouldn’t let it take over your life. I know how easy it is to become absorbed by the ShijinTenchishou and not pay attention to anything else around you. But Hikari would want you to have your own life, not worry about hers so much. You don’t have to devote all your time to this kind of research.”

“I do.” Arina rubbed her temples. “I can’t explain it, I just… I do.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

“If I’m doing this, then I’m closer to her somehow.” She added softly. “And I know she didn’t choose to leave me behind — it was just how it ended up. So I’d like a way of seeing her again, even if it’s just for a little while, to know she’s all right. You know? Just that would be enough. That’s why I got a job at the library like this — because it means I have access to places other people don’t. Places like that room, for example — the one Hi-chan said she found the book in originally. It’s not like I need to get a part time job for pocket money, after all — it’s all been about Hikari.”

“I sort of guessed that.” Keisuke eyed her keenly. “Are you done for today, though? If so, I’ll give you a ride home. I was hoping to speak to you in any case.”

“Speak to me?” Arina looked startled. “About what?”

A guilty flicker entered her dark eyes, and she frowned.

“If it’s about the texts you lent me a couple of months back, I’m still struggling through them.” She admitted. “So if you need them back… please… can you give me a week or so more? After all, I’m still getting to grips with this whole using my brain thing and it’s hard going. But interesting… and I want to read more.”

“No, it’s the opposite in fact.” Keisuke responded, handing her her jacket as the two of them got to their feet. Arina eyed him in confusion, scooping up her discarded books as she placed them on the trolley for reshelving in the morning. “I have something else to add to your pile of reading — if you’re interested. So long as your schoolwork isn’t suffering through all of this, Arina-chan. Hikari wouldn’t like that, if she thought it was.”

“My grades have been better since Hikari left than they ever were before.” Arina said ruefully. “Although they couldn’t have been much worse. I got into High School, didn’t I? I passed that exam and I made it into the middle class without too many problems. And I passed first year without having to do any resits, either. I’m all right, Keisuke-san. The house is empty so much I have plenty of time to finish assignments and do research into this stuff. And I don’t hang out on the town so much as I used to — Hi-chan isn’t here, after all, so it isn’t the same. All in all it’s fine. I manage.”

“If that’s the case, how about I treat you to coffee before we head back?” Keisuke suggested. “If you’re working so hard as that, you probably need a break.”

“Maybe.” Arina acknowledged. “All right. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Have you eaten yet? If not, I’m sure Mayo wouldn’t mind an extra mouth to feed.”

“Not since lunch.” Arina shook her head. “It’s all right. I can call for take out when I get back home.”

She offered him a smile.

“Hikari’s family are all so kind.” She observed wistfully. “Since I got into all of this China stuff you’ve been really helpful, Keisuke-san.

But you're nice to me, too. You and Sukunami-san and Miaka-san and… everyone. Even though she's gone, I don't feel like I've been rejected. It's almost like her family are becoming mine in some distant way. If that makes sense."

"I think so." Keisuke grinned at her. "Hikari would want it that way, too. I've no doubt she's worried about you as much as you are about her. She's that kind of kid, Hikari."

"Yeah." Arina pursed her lips, pulling her jacket over her shoulders. "All right, I'm done. And I'm curious, too. What did you want to talk to me about, in any case? What kind of additional reading?"

"When we get to the coffee shop, I'll show you." Keisuke promised. "I've had it some time, to be honest — I found it by accident when I was sorting through some old boxes in order to clear the room Mayo wants redecorated this spring. When I saw it, I thought of you and your current quest. It may be useless, of course — but I figured it couldn't hurt to offer it."

"Now I really am intrigued." Arina laughed. "You won't even give me a clue?"

"It's not that mysterious." Keisuke assured her. "You might even find it mundane, in the end. I guess we'll see, huh? It's not that it connects to Hikari directly, either. Probably not in any way, in fact. It's something I acquired when Miaka was Suzaku no Miko, so it likely has no bearing on my niece at all. But since you're working so hard, and since it's just sitting in a box doing nothing, you might as well have it."

At that moment they reached the library cafeteria, and soon they were seated at a corner table, Arina eying Keisuke expectantly as he took a sip of his espresso.

"Well?" She demanded. "Not to be pestering or anything, but tell me. What is this 'thing' you think I should have?"

"Not to be pestering, she says." Keisuke's eyes glittered with amusement and he nodded, reaching into his bag and pulling out what, to Arina, looked like an old, worn notebook. The edges of the fabric-bound covers were frayed and discoloured by age and time, and as Keisuke set it down on the table, Arina peered at it, trying to make out the kanji that decorated the front. At length she frowned, raising her gaze to his.

"This is… a name?" She murmured. "Or…? I don't understand."

"Oosugi Suzuno." Keisuke ran his fingers underneath the kanji with

a smile. “Have you heard of her, Arina-chan? In all your research, is it a name you’ve come across before?”

“Oosugi Suzuno.” Arina repeated it slowly, then shook her head. “I don’t think so. Should I have done? Is she important?”

“I’d say so.” Keisuke agreed. “Oosugi Suzuno was once a Miko, Arina. Just like Miaka and Yui… and Hikari, of course. We’re going back a good seventy or eighty years — heck, perhaps more. But Suzuno-san was Byakko no Miko who went into the book, raised the Tiger God and saved the West — Sairou — from destruction.”

“*Byakko* no Miko, huh?” Arina’s eyes lit up with interest. “I’ve heard of that — but not her name, I don’t think. I know… something about Okuda Takiko because of her father and all the stuff you told me about her and him and what happened to them. But I don’t think I know much about the second Miko… nothing at all, really.”

She reached out to touch the book.

“And this… was hers?”

“Yes.” Keisuke agreed. “A diary of sorts. When Miaka was missing, Tetsuya and I went to Morioka to see Suzuno-san and her surrogate family. Suzuno-san was an old lady on her death-bed at that time — she passed away while we were there, in fact. But the young man who had cared for her entrusted this to our care. I think it’s safe to say that our trip… was an unforgettable one. Even though we didn’t get to speak to Suzuno-san, exactly, we still understood what kind of Miko she’d been and what kind of connections Mikos can form. It was a revealing visit, and from time to time I’ve thought about going back to pay my respects to her grave.”

“Her diary, huh?” Arina picked the book up gingerly, eying Keisuke as she did so. “No wonder it looks so old, if she was alive all the way back then. It’s a shame she passed on before you could really talk to her — I bet she must have had some stories to tell. What Hikari told me was amazing enough — I’m sure the other Miko had the same kind of experiences.”

“Well, that’s why I wanted you to have that.” Keisuke said. “It’s not a magic book, and it hasn’t got any special powers surrounding it. It’s not a doorway to another world, no matter whether it was Suzuno-san’s or not. And it’s not a complete account of everything she and her Seishi encountered. But it is a glimpse into the mind of one of Hikari’s predecessors… so from that perspective I thought you’d be interested. Old reference books are fine, after all, but sometimes a personal touch is better when you want to understand the kind of situation someone

is in."

"No kidding." Arina hugged the book tightly to her chest. "Is it really all right for me to take it?"

"I have no reason to keep it." Keisuke assured her. "Miaka's legend is over, and Hikari… Hikari is not coming back to this world. That being the case, all I can do is what I've always done — play spectator and help provide information to those who need it. If it makes you feel closer to Hikari to have something like this, then I think you should have it."

"Thank you." Arina's eyes became wet with tears. "I know you've said that a lot — that Hi-chan isn't coming back, and won't ever, but I don't want to believe I'll not see her again. Somehow I'll get to the bottom of this. Suzuno-san did come back, after all. Didn't she? She must have. Like Miaka-san and Yui-san… they both came back, too. So Hikari… there must be a way."

"Hikari was more than a Miko, she was a Shinzahou too." Keisuke reminded her. "That changed everything where she was concerned."

He sighed.

"Suzaku's not a God that's easy to argue with." He said frankly. "None of them are. But you can take Suzuno's diary with pleasure, Arina-chan. If it is of any use to you, please, be my guest."

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

Two more days.

Princess Ouba of Sairou rested her chin in her hands with a sigh, gazing out across the palace grounds as she tried to absorb every single shade and colour into her memory. In just two days she would be leaving her home, she knew — and not only that. It would be a long time before she would set foot in Sairou's land again, and for one who had never travelled beyond the country's capital, the prospect of such a long and tiring journey terrified her young soul. Kutou's Emperor was an unknown quantity, and enough rumours had penetrated the Western court of the events in the East to make her significantly uneasy about the duty her father had placed on her head.

Yet there was no helping it either, she knew that. As Princess of Sairou and one of Heiboutei's favoured offspring, this was the duty she had been raised to face sometime in her future. Whether he be an Emperor or a Lord, Ouba had known from childhood that she was a valuable political commodity and that one day she would be traded as such in the name of her family's pride and peace. Such was Sairou's philosophy — and she knew royals before her had borne similar burdens without flinching. Now it would be her turn, and no matter how afraid she was, she was resolved not to run away from it.

The previous night her brother had called for her, taking her for a walk in the gardens where rare flowers not sustainable in other parts of Sairou bloomed in abundance, and amid the mingled scents and colours he had taken her aside, facing her with sombre, regretful dark eyes as he had met her gaze.

"*Make us proud, imouto-chan*." He had said, touching her cheek softly as if somehow, in this gesture, he could keep a part of her close to him. "*Be a brave emissary and as strong a one as any man going into the service of a King's court. For Sairou's trade and prosperity, Father has decided on this path for you. Even if it is many years before we meet again, promise me… do your best. And no matter what, do not let them see you falter*."

"And I will not, Oniisama." Despite herself, Ouba clenched her fists. "I will never let them see me weak. I will be as you and Father expect me — the honour of Sairou presented to Kintsusei of Kutou."

She sighed, sinking back down against the glass of the window as she remembered her brother's expression. Although Heiboutei had had other concubines and other children, only she and Nefuru had been born of his favourite consort and Empress Rie. Consequently, although Ouba knew she had brothers and sisters outside of the palace confines, she and Nefuru had grown up together, developing a strong, unyielding bond as the years had passed. Even now, more than anyone Ouba adored her brother and looked up to him for advice and guidance. He was, she knew, the brave first Prince for whom her parents had often given thanks to Byakko. Nefuru never doubted in anything, and was never wrong — and for most of her life she had relied on that strength and confidence to drive her forward also. But now it was different. She had been given a task this time — one she must carry out without his guiding hand.

"Ouba-hime?"

A voice from the doorway made her start and she glanced up, a faint smile touching her lips as she recognised the intruder.

"Kinka." She said softly. "Come in — it's all right. I'm just dwelling on things I can't change, again."

Kinka's expression broke into an amused smile and she nodded, slipping properly into the room and closing the door behind her.

"Better you do that now, Hime, than when we reach the East." She said softly, and Ouba laughed ruefully.

"Yes." She agreed. "I need to get it all out of my system before then. No matter how I feel, Kinka, I won't let Father or Oniisama down. They're counting on me and so will Sairou be, considering the fact that trade with Kutou can only bolster our economy. I understand all the reasons and I'm not trying to fight it. It just frightens me a little, that's all. I don't know anything about Kutou's Emperor, not really. And I only know that until recently they had civil war raging through their provinces. I wonder what kind of a place it is we're going to."

"I wouldn't like to guess that." Kinka dropped down on the floor, spreading her skirts around her as she gazed up at her mistress. "But I'm just glad I'm coming with you. I didn't want to leave your service quite yet, Hime… when Rouhei-sama told me I had been included in the party I was happy. Whatever we face in the East, we'll face together, after all."

"That's the thing I'm most glad of." Ouba admitted, reaching across to squeeze her companion's hands. "You may be my servant in terms

of the bigger picture, Kinka, but you know I don't see you as any different from a sister or a friend. And if I have to step into the Dragon's den, as it were, I would sooner do so with friends by my side."

"At your service, Hime." Kinka bowed her head playfully, and despite herself, Ouba laughed.

"Nefuru-niisama also said that Sayo would be coming." She added. "Until we reach Kutou, it'll just be the three of us. Father wants it to be a low key procession… he doesn't want to give people the idea that I'm travelling so far, in case it attracts danger. So that's how it'll be."

She sighed.

"In some ways I'm glad." She added. "You and Sayo I can trust. So I know I'll be safe."

"Without doubt." Kinka smiled. "Rouhei-sama would probably disown me if I dared to let you down, Hime."

"Does it bother you, Kinka, going to Kutou?" Ouba asked quizzically, and Kinka frowned, eying her companion in confusion.

"Why would it?" She asked. "I don't understand… what difference does it make to me?"

"Well… wasn't Kutou where… your Father…"

"Oh. Him." Kinka snorted, shaking her head. "No. Your concern is misplaced, Ouba-sama. My father was my father in blood only. Nothing else. Besides, Kutou did nothing except give him back to the people who sought justice from him. It was Sairou's authorities who struck his head from his body and burned the parts until his bones were black. If I bore any grudges, surely the grudges should be towards your family, not the people in the East?"

"Do you feel that way?" Despite herself Ouba hesitated, seeing the flicker of something deep in Kinka's aquamarine eyes, and her friend sighed.

"Do I resent it?" She asked softly, and Ouba nodded.

"Why would I?" Kinka shook her head. "I am the daughter of a madman and a fool who used his position to try and harm Sairou and then made his crimes worse by escaping to Kutou and attempting to join in their civil war there. By rights I should have been blacklisted by your Lord Father and his associates, yet instead I was brought here to be your companion. I am grateful to Heiboutei-heika, not resentful. My father did nothing for me except die before he embarrassed me

further. I owe the Emperor — and Rouhei-sama — everything. And you, Ouba-hime. I owe you the same debt for allowing me so close to you over the past few years."

She shrugged.

"I don't care if my father was handed back to Sairou by Kutou's government." She added. "My father is dead and Byakko have mercy on him. I have no interest in it… or in him."

"I think you mean that." Relief coursed Ouba's veins, and Kinka grinned.

"I do." She agreed. "I'm a good liar if I want to be, Ouba-hime — but you have my word I will never lie to you."

Ouba returned the grin, feeling comforted by the sparkle of sincerity in her companion's aquamarine eyes.

"Then it is well." She murmured, squeezing Kinka's hands tightly in her own. "We will go together, Kei Kinka-dono, to Kutou. I will meet the Emperor and, if conditions suit, I will become his Queen. And you will be by my side, just as you are here. Together, we will survive through this. Whatever Byakko asks of us."

"Without doubt." Kinka agreed. "To which end, it's getting late. Do you want a bath tonight, Hime? Or will you wait till the morning?"

"Morning, I think." Ouba stretched, stifling a yawn. "Worrying is tiring work… I think I'm ready to sleep. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Kinka shook her head. "Do you want my help, or shall I leave?"

"I'd like your company." Ouba admitted, as she reached up to loosen the ribbons at her throat. "It's more lonely when the night falls, and I have to remember that in only a couple of days I won't be here any more. This has been my whole world, after all. If you're here, I'll dwell on it less."

"As you wish." Kinka shrugged, sitting back on her heels in a most unladylike way, and Ouba eyed her in amusement.

"You have perfect court manners when you're faced with my father." She scolded. "Yet you seem to forget them all too easily when in my company, Kinka-chan. Should I be offended or pleased?"

"If you want me to be formal, Hime, I will be as formal as you like." Kinka's eyes danced with amusement as she got to her feet, bowing respectfully towards her companion. "But I was under the

impression you didn't like it when I acted that way."

Ouba laughed, shaking her head.

"No… I like Kinka how she really is." She said honestly. "The person who speaks to me plainly and doesn't bother to hide her views. That's the Kinka I want to take to Kutou with me when we leave."

"As my Princess wishes." Kinka responded, and Ouba shook her head slowly.

"If your father hadn't been a fool, you would have servants at court and a position of your own." She reflected, loosing her gown and stepping out of it as her companion automatically moved to scoop it up, folding it over her arm. "It's not uncommon for a Lady to be sent as companion to a Princess, but even so…"

"I don't mind. I don't think I'd make a good lady of the manor in any case." Kinka reflected. "Father's estate is still forfeit and under Heiboutei-heika's control — which suits me fine. Money and possessions make people greedy, and besides, my mother died in that house. I think it's cursed and so I've no desire to go back to it. I'm happy enough, you know, Hime — you shouldn't worry so much about unimportant things. I have Rouhei-sama, after all. He's more like an older brother than a distant blood cousin, and I have faith in him. It's not like I'm on my own or cast down into drudgery. I serve the Princess of Sairou, after all — I wouldn't want it any different."

"It's fortunate that you're not more materialistic." Ouba mused, releasing her long hair from its ribbons, and Kinka moved across towards her to tie it in its habitual braid for sleeping. As she did so, however, she faltered, and at her sudden hesitation, Ouba frowned, casting her a startled look.

"Kinka?"

At first there was no answer, and Ouba felt the trails of her hair fall loose against her back as she turned to face her companion. As she did so, consternation struck through her heart, for Kinka's complexion had turned the colour of snow and she was staring down at the hands that moments earlier had been deftly winding the thick dark hair together, the ribbon dropping unnoticed from her fingers to the floor below.

"Kinka-chan, what's the matter?" She pressed, and at this, Kinka seemed to stir from her daze, lowering her hands as she raised her gaze to her mistress's.

"Hime..?"

“Is something wrong?” Ouba looked concerned, and Kinka faltered, then, slowly, she shook her head.

“No.” She said at length. “I just… your father plans on sending you into the wilderness with this many split ends in your hair? You’d have thought that, even as a man, an Emperor would have thought of such things. I’ll see to it immediately, Hime-sama… you can’t meet your future beau looking like a ragamuffin, after all.”

With that she was gone, and Ouba frowned, her brows knitting together as she pondered on her friend’s sudden odd behaviour.

“She went white.” She murmured softly. “As if she’d seen a ghost. But… I’ve never seen Kinka so easily shaken before. What could she have seen that got her so worried? Was it all the talk about her father and his traitor’s death? Maybe she felt she’d summoned his spirit by talking so casually… but then Kinka’s not one to be scared of ghosts, even if they did come to haunt the palace. So what, then?”

She glanced down at herself, grasping a handful of dark hair in her hand as she examined the ends thoughtfully. As Kinka had said, they were split and in need of care, but somehow she knew that it had not been something so trivial and superficial that had caused that look to stir in her companion’s vivid aquamarine eyes.

“She told me that she could lie, but never to me.” She murmured. “So if that’s the case… why did she lie to me just then? What happened to change her expression and her mood so much that she had to leave the chamber. Kinka-chan, it’s only two days before we leave for Kutou. What can have worried you so much to make you act like that?!”

“Byakko no Miko’s diary, huh.”

Arina stretched out on her bed, kicking her legs idly against the headboard as she ran her fingers over the old book that lay in front of her on the covers. It was late now, the sun long since having set over the city, but despite the fact she knew the next day was a school day, she was loath to put her new prize aside and sleep. The faded fabric covers somehow seemed to be enticing her to open them, yet at the same time she was somewhat afraid to damage something which, so long ago had belonged to a girl caught between two worlds.

“Like Hi-chan.” She whispered, running a finger over the bleached out kanji of Suzuno’s name. “Only you came back. Even if Keisuke-san is right about this Shin… Shinzahou thing, I still can’t believe that it means Hikari has to stay there forever. Yeah, till she got that magic

under control — we couldn't have had her blowing up sinks and shit, after all. But I don't think I ever really believed that it would be permanent. Even though they said it — that guy with the one eye and Miaka-san and Sukunami-san… I don't think I totally absorbed that it really would be the rest of our lives. Hikari did say she'd try and visit, after all. But it's been a year and a bit and she hasn't. I wonder what's happened in that world since she went there… if she's a lot older than us now, or if it's not shifting so quickly. Miaka-san did say time moved differently… but it'd be odd to think of Hi-chan years and years older than I am. After all, my birthday is before hers. It'd just be too weird."

Gingerly she pulled the book towards her, peering at it more closely.

"Oosugi Suzuno." She murmured. "All right then, Byakko no Miko-sama. I'm going to go looking through your secrets now… please don't be mad, because I'm doing it for the sake of a friend."

Slowly she opened the cover, smoothing the discoloured pages down. Only a few lines were written there, and as she read them, Arina felt a bittersweet pang touch her heart.

"*The ShijinTenchishou has the power to change lives one way or the other*." She read softly. "*It's a world which no amount of explaining can truly describe and which cannot be understood by any except those who have been there*."

Beneath it were written two characters;

「婁宿」

Arina frowned, running her finger over them as she tried to work out how they should be read. As she did so, she felt a prickle run down her spine and she gasped, pulling back from the book as she glanced around her in surprise and alarm. For the briefest moment she had felt something twitch at the edge of her awareness, as if someone, somewhere was trying to speak to her.

"Suzuno-san, from the beyond?" She wondered, biting her lip. "Or something else? Maybe I shouldn't read books written by dead people when it's dark and I'm alone in the house. But that was weird. It was like… like something reached inside and touched my soul."

She glanced back at the book, eying the two characters pensively once more.

"Whatever it means, it makes no sense to me." She said aloud, even as she reached across for the worn kanji dictionary that lay on her bedside cabinet. "All right. That one… is '*rou*'? Bond? What kind of a

bond? Was that what I felt when I touched the page? The other one is '*yado*'…inn? Is this the name of a place, then? Somewhere Suzuno-san stayed when she was in that world? Ah, that makes no sense. This is a diary, not a good food guide. What were you trying to say, Suzuno-sama? It makes no sense to me."

She dropped the dictionary back down onto her covers, reached across to pick up the diary once more. As she did so, something fluttered from between the pages, and, confused, Arina picked it up. It was a sheet of notepaper, roughly folded and coloured by age, but as she unfolded it, she realised that someone had drawn a rough diagram on it and even now, after so many years, the image was clear enough to make out.

As she gazed at it, Arina's heart skipped a beat.

"The stars." She whispered, pushing everything else aside as she hopped down from her bed, rummaging among the pile of library books she had borrowed for the one that she wanted. "This one — this is it, I'm sure… that picture I've seen before. At least, something like it. It's what Hikari talked about — what Keisuke-san told me about when I first started researching this whole ShijinTenchishou business. The stars — the twenty eight mansions of the sky. The four Gods, Suzaku, Byakko, Genbu and Seiryuu. All of that ancient Chinese heresy shit… that's the stuff this world of Hi-chan's is based on, isn't it? She was Seiryuu no Miko. Miaka-san was Suzaku no Miko. And Suzuno-san was Byakko no Miko. Byakko is the white tiger — the western sky. Right?"

She flipped over a couple more pages, letting out an exclamation of triumph as she found the right diagram.

"Aries… Pisces… ah! That's it! That's that kanji again!"

She dumped the text book down on the bed, pulling Suzuno's diary towards her as she compared the characters. Though one was written in an old fashioned hand and the other in more modern print, there was no doubt they were meant to be the same character, and a grin crossed Arina's features.

"Tataraboshi." She murmured. 'That's what it says. Tataraboshi. And if I'm following this correctly… you weren't just writing about stars, were you, Suzuno-san? This refers to a *person*. After all, when that guy Chichiri came from the other world to get Hikari, I looked up the Suzaku thing and I found his name there — Chichiriboshi, Tasukiboshi, Tamahomeboshi… all of these star patterns that relate to people in the other world. So… if I'm right… this kanji doesn't mean

“bond’ or” inn “. It means *Tatara* — one of Byakko’s seven Seishi.”

She sighed, shutting the text book with a snap.

“But why you wrote it there is beyond me.” She murmured. “Obviously it meant something to you. And obviously whatever it meant was deep enough that even all these years later I picked up a vibe from it just by running my fingers over your words. Still, it was spooky. Words are still words, after all. They can’t speak by themselves — they need someone to read them.”

She fumbled in her bag for her cigarettes, putting one to her lips as she reached for her lighter.

“Enough for one night.” She decided, exhaling a cloud of smoke and dropping the lighter back down onto the cabinet with a clatter. “It’s too late and I’m getting spooked. Tomorrow night I’ll look at it some more. Everything associated with that world is weird, and I should tackle it with a clear mind if I’m going to try and make any of it make sense at all.”

She glanced at Suzuno’s diary, then scooped it up with her free hand, placing it carefully on the top of her bookshelf.

“Good night, Suzuno-sama.” She said softly. “Tomorrow I guess we’ll talk again. If it was you… trying to talk to me. Well, whatever it was… it can wait till tomorrow. And I can ask Keisuke-san about the diagram, too.”

A faint smile touched her lips.

“Maybe I am a step closer to Hi-chan after all.” She murmured, flicking ash into the tray that sat on her windowsill. “If it was something connected to that world that brushed against my senses. Maybe there is still a way to bring her back — and if there is, I’m going to find it!”

“Rouhei-sama! Rouhei-sama!”

Kinka ran through the halls of the palace, her breath coming in heavy gasps as she pushed open the door of her guardian’s workroom. “Rouhei-sama, please tell me you’re here!”

“Kinka-chan?” From behind a tall wooden bookshelf, a man emerged, peering at her in surprise as he took in her uncharacteristically unsettled appearance. “What’s the matter? This isn’t like you — has something happened to Princess Ouba? Or… what’s troubling you? I’ve not seen that look in your eyes since the

day I told you what had happened to your father… what's wrong?"

"Father's nothing to do with it." Kinka shook her head, grasping her guardian by the wrists as she gazed up at him urgently. "Please, Rouhei-sama, I need… I need to talk to you. I think… maybe… this whole trip to Kutou is a mistake. A big mistake! I think… Ouba-hime and I… I think we shouldn't go."

"Now, why the change of mind all of a sudden?" Rouhei's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he set aside the book he had been reading, reaching up to touch the girl's cheek with dusty fingers. "You weren't so reluctant when we spoke earlier. What's happened between then and now to make you feel like that?"

"I…" Kinka flushed red, biting her lip. "I don't… know how to… explain. I haven't even… to Ouba-hime. But… Rouhei-sama, I don't know what to do. Whether to go to the Emperor and tell him everything, or… but then so far we've kept so much from him, and if he knew I'd been… that I was… that I'd somehow…"

She trailed off, and Rouhei rested his hands on her shoulders, giving her a little shake.

"Report to me, Kei Kinka." He said quietly. "Calm down and report to me. I want to know everything before I decide whether or not this is a matter to go before Heiboutei-sama. You understand?"

Kinka nodded slowly, taking a deep breath into her lungs as she fought to calm her rising panic.

"I… saw… it." She said softly, and Rouhei's eyes widened.

"It?" He echoed, and Kinka nodded.

"The thing… that… you said… might be there." She said falteringly. Rouhei's eyes narrowed, and he nodded his head.

"I see." He said softly. "And you're sure? There's no mistake?"

"I'm sure, Rouhei-sama. It's just as you said." Kinka nodded. "Everything you told me… and now…"

Rouhei sighed, shaking his head.

"And now you don't want to accompany her Highness to Kutou, because of this?" He asked quietly. "You knew before, Kinka, that sooner or later it might come to this. Everything that I've studied has pointed to it. Changes in the stars, constellations altering their patterns — atmospheric shifts and climatic uncertainties. Sairou's hot summer and dry winter. All of these things are just as I anticipated

them… you shouldn't have been so surprised that this part of my prediction would also pan out."

Kinka's eyes narrowed, and she sighed.

"But Rouhei-sama…"

"Why are you here, Kinka-chan?" Rouhei raised an eyebrow, and Kinka sighed again.

"To protect people from harm and serve Ouba-hime and her family with my life." She said simply. Rouhei nodded.

"I brought you to the court because I knew you had the instinct to protect." He said quietly. "You remember that, don't you? It wasn't so very long ago that we had that conversation about things. When I asked you if you intended to fight for your father's title and inheritance, or whether you'd sacrifice all of the Kei burdens to come to the palace and learn the best way to protect the things dear to you."

He touched her cheek again.

"I remember a little girl standing defiantly before me, telling me that she would never let anyone she loved be taken from her again." He added. "And that whatever she could do to ensure that, she'd do."

"I remember." Kinka admitted. "I was only eleven or twelve when Father first fled into hiding and abandoned the manor completely. I didn't know why he'd gone, then — why he'd left me like Mother did. When I understood… I didn't want any part of that world any more. When I knew what he'd done…"

She closed her eyes, shaking her head as if to clear it of the memories.

"You brought me here to protect me as much as you brought me here to protect Ouba-hime." She whispered. "You wanted me to live, you told me that. That if I stayed loyal to the Kei-ke, I might lose my life in my father's downfall. But if I renounced it, I would be allowed to live. And so I have, Rouhei-sama. All because you knew we were coming to this point, and that one day everything you taught me would somehow become useful. But even so…"

"Even so?"

"I truly love Ouba-hime." Kinka admitted. "Like the sister I didn't have. And I wanted to always be by her side to protect her from anything, no matter what."

“And has that changed now, because of this?” He pressed. Kinka slowly shook her head.

“No, but… Rouhei-sama, what you’re asking of me is… that if we leave Sairou, I can’t be…”

“Try to finish a sentence or two, there’s a good girl.” Rouhei’s lips twitched into an amused smile. “I know how you feel, but this isn’t one of those things where personal affection can get in the way. Ouba-hime’s fate is set in Kutou, and you must go with her. Even if now you don’t want to — you must. Even if my predictions are correct. Now you know, your role as protector has been stepped up a gear, hasn’t it? You know what that mark means, after all. Don’t you? What it requires you to do?”

Kinka closed her eyes, then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“I know.” She said softly. “But Ouba-hime is more important to me than Byakko, Rouhei-sama. Should I really be put in the middle of that choice? I want to protect my Princess in every way I can. If Byakko interferes, can I really keep doing that?”

“If you can’t, you’re not the girl I trained.” Rouhei told her affectionately. “Take this as advance warning, all right? You know before you leave what the nature of things are. Of course, Kutou is a long way from Sairou. But for now we must all just play the parts assigned us — you realise that, don’t you? Things are too vague to understand them any more deeply than we currently do.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Kinka rubbed her temples. “All right. All right, I’ll think over everything you’ve said and I’ll do as you advise. I’ll keep my word to Heiboutei-heika and stay by Ouba-hime’s side so long as I’m able. And Byakko… Byakko will just have to wait for the time being. After all…”

“After all, it’s still speculative.” Rouhei reached across to tap the cover of his book absently. “Whatever it does or doesn’t mean, there is no disaster in Sairou and no sign, yet, of anyone come to prevent it. For now, try not to worry too much about it, all right? Things will go how they are meant to go, so just be prepared for whatever comes.”

“Yes, Rouhei-sama.” Kinka agreed softly. “I’ll do that.”

She eyed him quizzically.

“Will you tell… anyone else?”

“No.” Rouhei shook his head. “Not yet. And you mustn’t, either. Not even the Princess you want to protect — especially not her. For

now, as I said, there's nothing to tell. Go about your usual duties, Kinka, and leave the worrying to me. I'll keep a close eye on the stars and I'll contact you in Kutou if I need to pass on any further data. Put your faith in that — I won't leave you unprepared."

He smiled, and Kinka saw genuine affection in his gaze.

"You're a good girl. Your father should have realised that instead of taking the law into his own hands and thinking only of himself." He murmured. "How much he lost by not bothering to know you."

"I guess Father really didn't see a point in only having a daughter." Kinka said frankly. "Girls are useless, right?"

"Not this one." Rouhei's eyes twinkled. "As well I know. Well, he was fool enough to die for his ignorance, after all. You won't be so easy to take down, I don't think. I believe you were born to be Ouba's protector, you know that. When I first took responsibility for teaching you, it was for that reason — because I'd seen your stars and I knew what kind of a person you would grow to be. I knew you were your mother's daughter, not your father's — and I put my hopes in that when I taught you the things our people know."

"Mother's people." Kinka said softly. "I have my father's features, Rouhei-sama, yet you still look at me and liken me to mother's people."

"My people. Our people. Yes." Rouhei agreed. "Your spirit flows with a particular energy, Kinka-chan, and I hope that when the time comes you'll find a way to harness that. The news you've brought to me tonight is indication that you might yet be Sairou's protector too, in the things you do now. I have high hopes of you — expectations I know you'll be able to meet, no matter what the asking price."

He touched her gently on the cheek.

"Do well by your Princess and by me, Kinka-chan — time will tell whether or not Byakko has further things in mind for us to face!"

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

Nefuru paced across his study, glancing bad-temperedly at the pile of papers that littered his desk as he did so. He had many things to oversee and sign, and his work had continued to pile up, but despite that fact he could not think of anything but his younger sister's imminent progress to the Eastern territories. Since his meeting with his father, he had done his best to elicit information from the palace agents about the Emperor of Kutou, and though the things he had heard had somewhat put his mind at rest, he was still not happy that Ouba was being forced so far from her home on a political technicality.

"I've always protected her, and now I can't." He muttered, clenching his fists. "She'll belong to another Kingdom and live under another crown. I won't be able to reach her any more — not once she's gone to Kutou."

"Talking to yourself is a bad sign, Nefuru-sama."

An amused voice from the doorway startled the prince and he turned, his expression becoming sheepish as he recognised his companion.

"Perhaps, but I'm agitated." He owned, gesturing for the man to join him. "I can't think of anything else at the moment. Not with Ouba's departure on the horizon."

"You really need to work better at hiding your emotions, if you don't want the girl to realise how you feel." Rouhei said astutely. "She's not a stupid girl, even if she always has been protected. You'll make her even more nervous, and I imagine she's plenty frightened enough as it is."

"Yes, which is why I'm here and not with her." Nefuru groaned. "Rouhei, thank you for releasing Kinka to go with her. In the circumstances…"

"What else would I do?" Rouhei's eyes twinkled with humour. "She was born and trained for this eventuality, after all. She knows it and I know it. Kinka would sooner lay down her life than let anything befall your sister. You needn't have any worries on that score."

“At least that’s some comfort, although I hope it won’t come to anything so drastic.” Nefuru mused. “But I trust your word, Rouhei. I know you wouldn’t lie to me — not about something like this.”

“Of course not.” Rouhei shook his head. “But you worry entirely too much, my Prince. Your sister will be fine. She’s stronger than you realise. Believe me.”

“Let me guess. It’s written in her stars.” Despite himself Nefuru grinned, shaking his head in amusement. “Maybe you read those dusty old astrology tomes far too much, my friend. I know that your people have always been extremely good at that kind of divination, however… not everything is decided by the movement of heavenly bodies. Some things people decide for themselves, after all. Stars are a long way away, when you think about it. They can’t possibly watch over everything we do.”

“I think differently.” Rouhei admitted. “But I should know better than to argue with a Prince. Besides, astrology is, as you say, one of the foundation stones of the Han-ke’s existence. I’d be betraying my own blood if I didn’t think outside the box.”

He smiled.

“You tolerate my oddities quite well, considering.” he reflected. “I appreciate that, Nefuru-sama. Many wouldn’t. Especially granting favour to a younger son — and one who’s taken it upon himself to play guardian to the daughter of a traitor. Sairou is a blessed country indeed to have royalty who can look so far beyond appearances.”

“You better than any know why that is, Rouhei.” Nefuru dropped down into an empty seat, gazing up at his friend as he did so. “Nothing you have done — or your family, for that matter — has even come near the scars that exist in my family’s history. Your family records list them as much as mine, after all. The Han-ke and the Imperial throne of Sairou have always been connected. You might be the youngest, but your mother said you were the most attuned to the movement of stars and she was right. Besides, you might not be the family heir but you have other attributes. You take after your family’s line, after all. And that’s proven to be useful to me more than once in the past.”

“Perhaps.” Rouhei acknowledged. “The Han-ke have always preferred to serve on the side of the Emperor, after all.”

He grinned.

“We read the stars and know how to follow them.” He added.

“And your stars tell you that Ouba should go to Kutou?”

“They tell me that she’s safer there than here, my Prince.”

“What do you mean?” Nefuru was immediately alert, noticing the sudden sobriety of his companion’s emerald eyes. “Explain yourself, Rouhei — why would you make such a statement about a country where there has been peace for over a hundred years?”

“Complacency is as grave a sin as aggression.” Rouhei said simply. “Nothing has happened and nothing may occur. But there is a possibility of change. You shouldn’t be too easy on your laurels, my Prince. Just in case.”

“Rebels who act against the throne are swiftly dealt with.” Nefuru said frankly. “Kei Engai is a prime example. That kind of uprising would never gain any ground here, not with my father’s way of running things. You know it and I know it — and I intend to follow his lead in that regard when it comes to be my turn. Why would you look at me with such serious eyes, Rouhei? You surely know that this government is strong and stable.”

“Against men, yes.” Rouhei agreed. “But against other things? Perhaps not.”

“So explain yourself!” Nefuru demanded, banging his hand down on the desk to emphasise his point. “Speak! What have your stars told you this time, Rouhei? You won’t keep secrets from me — I won’t allow it!”

“Such petulance from a Prince of the Realm.” Rouhei tut-tutted, and despite himself Nefuru scowled.

“I have a wife and an infant son to think of.” He snapped. “More, I have the wellbeing of this country to think of. Don’t play games with me. We may have played and teased as boys, but we’re not boys now. Our positions have changed, and you shouldn’t tease me when there’s something of importance in the offing. You’re not here to play my big brother, you’re here as my ally and aide. Or have you forgotten that boundaries still exist between royal blood and Han blood, even after all these years?”

Rouhei eyed the prince for a moment, an unreadable expression in his green eyes. Then, very pointedly, he dropped before the Prince in a bow.

“My apologies.” He said softly. “I did not mean offence.”

“Save it.” Nefuru said abruptly. “Just tell me what you mean — I’m

in no mood for wasted niceties."

"You really are concerned about Ouba-hime's safety." Rouhei raised his head, and Nefuru could see the searching glint in the depths of those emerald eyes. "Very well. It's the reason I came to you, after all."

He held up the books and folded parchment that he had carried under his arm, and Nefuru gestured to him to spread them on the table, getting once more to his feet as he glanced down at them.

"Well?" he asked softly. "Reading star-charts is a uniquely Han talent, Rouhei. You'll have to help me see my way through these signs and angles."

"That depends on whether it's a long or a short answer you want." Rouhei said reflectively. "The long will fill you in on many more of the details. But the short may be easier on your patience, Nefuru-sama."

"Start with the summary and we'll see how we go." Nefuru murmured, and Rouhei nodded.

"This chart was drawn from the data gathered in the last few months." He said softly. "Lately there have been minor fluctuations among some star patterns… minute signs that most people won't see, but which to someone like me with a particular interest can't be ignored. They indicate changes in Sairou's stability. More specifically, they centre on one particular area of the sky. The stars belonging to Byakko."

"Byakko?" Nefuru's eyes narrowed. "And that means…?"

"You know the history of the situation probably better than I in some respects." Rouhei admitted. "But the last time such a change occurred was over a hundred years ago. In the weeks and months preceding the arrival of Oosugi Suzuno-sama to Sairou."

"What?" Nefuru paled, grasping the chart and pulling it towards him as he studied the star diagrams anew. "But that was a long time ago — generations ago! The dangers that Sairou faced then are long gone, Rouhei. Surely you don't believe that anyone of our blood now…"

He faltered, unable to form the words, and Rouhei shook his head.

"I don't believe anything of the sort, my Prince." He said gravely. "But I am concerned. There is one other thing that has come to my attention just recently, and it's made me think about everything again

in much more detail. The stars aren't the only sign that something is coming."

"And…?" Nefuru frowned. "What does that mean?"

"When Suzuno-sama came to Sairou she had seven acolytes who used their powers to help subdue the danger and raise Byakko over the Western skies." Rouhei said quietly. "Those marks should not show up on anyone, reborn soul or not, except if they are called to do the God's work. My family understand this better than many, since in the past two of Byakko's people were born from the Han line. I've always known that it would one day happen again, but I never expected to see the reoccurrence of the phenomenon in my life-time. Even when my foolish cousin-in-law decided to sell himself out to his greed, I didn't fully anticipate this happening so soon. But there's no doubt in my mind, now. Even as we speak, my Prince, within this land are people born with Byakko's spirit running through them. Those who already bear the white mark of the Tiger somewhere on their body. And that means…"

"That Sairou is in peril." Nefuru whispered, his earlier anger gone as he stared at his friend in dismay. "But how? How, Rouhei? And why? After all this time, surely…"

"That much I don't know." Rouhei said regretfully. "I'm not a seer — I'm only an astrologer who reads the messages written in the stars. I have no spiritual abilities to call on and no way to see clearly the future, such as it is. There has only ever been one member of the Han-ke who has had that ability, and it died with her in the Kanin mountains. You know it and I know it. That kind of knowledge is beyond my ken."

Nefuru sank back down in his seat, rubbing his temples as he digested this.

"Have you approached my Lord Father with this information?" He asked at length, and Rouhei shook his head.

"Not yet." He admitted. "I would sooner Ouba-hime and Kinka had left Sairou before I did that."

"You think that Ouba will really be safer in Kutou, don't you?"

"I think that for the time being her carrying out her Father's wishes should be foremost on her agenda." Rouhei agreed softly. "And I have told Kinka this, too. She knows what I know, my Prince — to be truthful, she has known for some time that I've suspected this eventuality. It's one of the reasons I most wanted her here, at court, to

provide some protection and security for the Princess."

"So you think this threat, whatever it is, poses some danger to Ouba?"

"I think it could." Rouhei admitted. "Like yourself, she is descended from *that* blood, and I feel sure there's a connection to the past in all of this. That there has been some increase in spiritual activity all over Sairou cannot be ignored. Even though I don't feel such things myself — I'm aware that others do."

"The curse of our family come back to haunt us, in fact." Nefuru bit his lip. "But Makiko is dead. Long dead. Surely…?"

"A witch's spirit is never truly dead." Rouhei shook his head. "Sealed, perhaps, but not destroyed. You know that as well as I do — that she's only sleeping, not gone from this world. So far all is well, since she can't easily be freed from her prison or break out of the seal Byakko's people put on her. But even so, the indications are that something is about to happen. And I'm sure, judging by the angle of the atmospheric changes, that we're dealing with the spirit sealed within the Kanin peaks. She has a lot of grudges, and she's had a long time to work them out inside of herself. That being the case, Nefuru-sama, I think Ouba-hime would be much safer at the Eastern court. Kintsusei-sama is just a man, after all, even if he is a promising Emperor and a spokesman for Kutou's future. Makiko is something far more sinister — and at present we don't have anything which can deal with the threat she may pose."

"I see." Nefuru's eyes darkened, and he sighed. "I dislike it, but you are usually sound in your advice to me, Rouhei. I apologise for having been so sharp with you… it seems I do still rely on your knowledge far more than I give you credit for."

"You've always been a touch hot-tempered, my Prince." Rouhei eyed him in amusement. "And perhaps I did overstep the line. When you spend so much time with someone as children it's difficult to always observe the division in rank. But I will remember — you are, after all, Prince of Sairou. And I am simply Han Rouhei, court astrologer and nothing more."

"Nothing more." Nefuru echoed, then he snorted, shaking his head.

"You'd like to believe that, I think." He murmured. "But we both know that it's not the case. Otherwise, what are the arts and skills you've taught young Kinka? What kind of girl have you made her into, if you're simply a court astrologer?"

“Yourself, Lady Sashi, Kinka and the Emperor aside, my Prince, that information is not known.” Rouhei said easily. “Even my own family don’t know that I’ve inherited that mantle as well as the one of star-reader from my clan. Unless Kinka has confided in her mistress I doubt that Ouba-hime knows much more than the fact I’ve mentored her since her father fled his estate. Probably it’s better that way… the fewer who do know, the better.”

“Indeed.” Nefuru murmured softly. “Rouhei, tell me — Kinka’s skills are good enough to keep Ouba safe, no matter what happens on this trip?”

“Whatever happens, I’m sure that Kinka will be prepared.” Rouhei nodded. “I’d trust her to protect my life, Nefuru-sama, and I trust her to protect Ouba’s, also. I told you. She’s loyal to the death for the Princess’s sake. You needn’t worry. Nothing will befall your sister on her journey East.”

So, that was everything.

Ouba stood back, twisting her fingers together absently as she watched the servants shifting and loading her belongings onto the carriage that, early the next morning would carry her away from her home and into territory unknown. Despite herself, she bit her lip, refusing to lose her composure in front of the palace staff. Somehow, though, it didn’t feel like she was leaving on a journey. It almost felt that, in some ways, Ouba-hime was being removed from the Palace of Sairou and erased from the Western land completely. She glanced at her hands, observing the faintly red nail marks across her skin and she smiled ruefully, realising that she had been gripping tightly onto her own fingers without even registering the pain.

“Ouba-chan.”

A voice from behind her startled her and she turned, a smile crossing her features as she greeted her sister-in-law warmly. Sashi was three years her elder, and more like a real sister to her than any of the half-sisters her father had spawned across Sairou’s provinces, and she knew that here was another person she would miss with her heart and soul once the carriage had begun to roll through the immense pearl and silver gates.

Sashi was one of the few people with whom Ouba had always been able to be herself. On their first acquaintance Sashi had hugged her and called her Ouba-chan, oblivious to the stares and whispers such a casual attitude had brought from members of the Emperor’s council,

and Ouba had welcomed the informality, knowing that here was someone who saw her as a person and not just a Princess. Sashi's wedding to Nefuru had been a pre-arranged affair, for Sashi was the eldest daughter of an influential Sairou family, the Ueke, but it had also been love at first sight, and Ouba was slightly envious of the close bond her brother and his wife had shared almost from the start.

Unlike Ouba and Nefuru, who shared the classic olive complexion of the desert West, Sashi's skin was fair, and she was petite in height and build, giving her an appearance of fairy-like fragility. The stark contrast between her delicate complexion and her dark brows and hair gave her the appearance of a china doll, but that illusion was soon broken on meeting the Princess Consort's mischievous ebony eyes. Everyone at court who had ever claimed an acquaintance with Nefuru's chosen consort knew that Sashi's angel-like beauty concealed razor-sharp wits, and few ever tried to take advantage of her situation a second time. Heiboutei had welcomed the addition of such a person to his family, certain that Sashi's perception and understanding could only be of benefit to Nefuru in the years ahead. When they had been blessed with a son a year earlier, none had been happier than Ouba — although at the same time she had realised that her own usefulness at court had been changed by the birth of the Prince's heir, and that it was only a matter of time before her father started looking for a suitable husband.

"You're really going this time." Sashi looked pensive, a clouded look in her pretty dark eyes as she surveyed her companion mournfully. "I suppose it has been coming, since you're not a little girl any more. I'll miss you, Ouba… you know that, don't you?"

"Yes. I think it goes without saying that the feeling is returned in kind." Ouba nodded her head. "You and my brother and my nephew and everything that I'm used to. But I'm not going to complain about it, Sashi. I'm going to accept it and I'm going to go make my Father proud by taking Sairou's honour to Kutou. That's my duty as the First Princess and I'm not going to let anyone down."

"You and your brother are alike when you talk like that." Sashi eyed her affectionately. "Are you needed here? Or will you come with me to say your farewells to my young son, Ouba-chan? You won't have time in the morning and I don't suppose any of his nurses will allow him to be woken at dawn for any reason."

"I'll come." Ouba agreed. "I feel like there are a lot of people I have to say goodbye to and I ought to begin while I can. Besides, I won't see my nephew grow up. He'll be a stranger to me, and it makes me

sad."

"But you may have sons of your own by then." Sashi said lightly, and Ouba frowned.

"Maybe." She agreed softly. "If things go that way."

"Do you hate the idea, then, of marrying a King?"

"I hate the idea of marrying a stranger." Ouba said honestly. "The fact he's a King makes no difference to me."

"Well, I felt the same when my father shipped me off here." Sashi reflected. "But in the end, all was well. I wouldn't have gone back, you know — not after I'd met Nefuru and found out what kind of a man he was. It was happy for me, in the end. I'm sure it will be happy for you, too."

She slipped her fingers into the folds of her robe, pulling out something that glittered in the midday sun, and as she held it out, Ouba gazed at her in surprise.

"Sashi…?"

"This is for you." Sashi grinned, twitching the object to reveal the sparkling silver chain and the polished pendant that hung from it. "For your safety, Ouba-chan — as you go so far away from home."

"Kitora's tree." Gently Ouba took the delicate pendant, glancing from it's pearl-set form to her companion. "That's what it is, isn't it? The character for tree set with pearl, like the one you have in the shrine in your private chamber."

"Yes." Sashi's eyes twinkled. "I've asked the mage spirit to guard you as she guards Byakko's land and people, Ouba-chan, and I've cast the Ueke's best protective charm over the pendant to keep you safe on your journey East. You should wear it all the time… if you do then I'm sure no harm will befall you."

"Sashi…" Ouba's eyes became wet with tears as she carefully fastened the pendant around her neck, hugging her companion tightly. "Thank you. I know how much faith you have in Kitora's spirit and that she's truly protecting us all on Byakko's behalf. To have something like this means a lot to me — I'm sure you're right and that it will keep me safe."

"Well, the Ueke have deified Kitora's spirit since as long as records exist, and the family has always prospered in strength, influence and wealth." Sashi said comfortably, holding her sister-in-law at arm's length as she gently wiped the tears from the younger girl's lashes. "I

know it's a cult that hasn't spread far beyond the northern Sairou territories, but perhaps its time it did."

"I almost envy your family that doubtless faith." Ouba ran her fingers over the shimmering pendant, half-sure it was glowing as much from Sashi's protective charm as it was from the Western sun. "Wood is Byakko's element, and trees are sacred here because they are scarce among the desert land and because the characters for 'tree' and 'spirit' share the same reading — '*ki*'. But sometimes he — and it — seem very far away. Yet your people have believed for so long that Kitora exists, and more, that somewhere in Sairou her spirit is sealed away waiting for the time she's needed. I wish I felt that much conviction that there was someone there to watch over us. Sometimes…"

She sighed, slipping the pendant beneath the collar of her dress.

"Sometimes I lose faith in even Byakko himself." She murmured. "Is that a terrible thing to say? But I wonder if he really does watch over us that closely. And more, if something bad was to happen — would he really intervene?"

"He did a century ago, when Byakko no Miko and her people saved this land." Sashi looked startled. "Why would you doubt, considering our peace now is thanks to him? Ouba-chan, you're letting this arranged match get blown all out of proportion!"

"No, it isn't that." Ouba frowned. "Just… Sairou has peace, and the terrible dangers that existed before… I know they've gone. It's not that. But people are still poor in parts of Sairou, Sashi. That's why I'm going to Kutou as much as anything. When Father told me, he made it clear that Sairou could benefit from trade with Kutou on a large scale, since Kutou have plentiful crops and good supplies of water. Kutou have suffered war and violence for a long time yet even though they are only now finding peace, they still have better resources than Sairou does. So much so that Father feels he has to treat with their court and send me as bait to seal the agreement. Sairou is not as strong as its neighbours to the North and South — and soon it won't be as strong as Kutou either, once Kutou have fully found their feet."

"And you blame Byakko for this?" Sashi asked sharply. Ouba sighed, shaking her head.

"No, I don't blame him." She said slowly. "I don't have any kind of feeling like that. I just wonder if he really can solve all of our problems — and if he can, why he didn't. Byakko no Miko wished for it, didn't she? I suppose I don't understand why it is Byakko didn't

grant it in its entirety."

Sashi was silent for a moment, then she pursed her lips.

"I suppose that's a matter for individual faith, Ouba-chan." She said at length. "Myself, I think Byakko did what Byakko thought best for Sairou at the time. *We* have to do the rest to make this country thrive. That's why I came to the palace and married Nefuru — to bring the Ueke clan's arts and beliefs back to the centre of court, and to birth a prince with true faith to fall back on in times of hardship or doubt."

She touched her companion gently on the cheek.

"And you too, my friend." She said softly. "Your duty is to go East and establish those trade links in Kutou for Heiboutei-heika. Who's to say it wasn't Byakko's paw that guided the Emperor into making that match? As I said, it's all a matter for individual faith. But don't lose yours, Ouba, just because you're afraid to leave your home. Nefuru will worry enough about you as it is. I don't want him to fret about you going without Byakko's blessing into the Dragon's land."

"You're right." Ouba looked ashamed. "I'm letting my doubts and fears turn ugly, and I shouldn't. I'm sorry, Sashi. You're right."

She brushed the pendant again, watching it glitter with light as her fingers touched the pearl-cast surface.

"If I have this, I have your faith, and that'll help me find mine." She murmured. "It'll be like you're with me, and I won't be so alone."

"Exactly." Sashi dimpled. "Though you'll write to me, surely? You don't intend on cutting off all communications once there, do you?"

"No, of course not!" Ouba's eyes widened in surprise and she shook her head. "I'll be writing as much as I can to everyone, don't worry about that! I'll be relying on people here to keep me connected to the things I love, even if I can't be around them any more."

"Then it's a promise." Sashi said firmly, reaching out to clasp her companion's slender fingers in her own delicate ones. "And now, to the Prince's chamber. He should be up and around by now, and he's always happy when he sees you."

"He's a lovely baby." Ouba reflected, as she followed her sister-in-law through the hallways towards the palace Nursery, acknowledging the bows of ministers and guards on their way. "If one day I do have princes of my own, Sashi, I hope they're as nice and as well-behaved as Shinju is."

"Well, I'm sure he won't be that way for always. He is a man, after

all, and men do like their own way." Sashi reflected ruefully. "But I'm sure that your children will be as beautiful and as well-mannered as you are, if and when they choose to come. Still…"

She paused outside the door, casting her companion a pensive look.

"I don't know what kind of man Kintsusei-sama is, although the reports Nefuru has been researching suggest he's not so heinous a one as his late father." She said, a sudden seriousness in her dark eyes. "But listen to me, Ouba-chan. You're young and unblemished — and he's a man of twice your years, who has probably had plenty of time to brush up the best ways to lure and seduce an unsuspecting woman. Do not let him take you to his chamber until you are ready to go — do you understand me? Sairou's honour and trade may depend on you making this match, but your own honour as a Princess and a woman demands you give yourself that respect and time. You aren't simply a chattel for him to use and discard except when it suits him. Ensure he knows it, Ouba — ensure he knows that if he scars you, there are people in Sairou on whom you can depend for aid."

Ouba stared at the older woman in surprise, and Sashi laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Maybe it won't happen." She said lightly. "If he's a good or sensible man like your brother, he'll allow you your time to settle and adjust before promises are made and chastities broken. But just in case it's otherwise — you are a Princess of *this* realm, even if you are a foreigner in that one. Remember it when you're with him — only give him what you want to give him and no more. Understand?"

Slowly Ouba nodded her head.

"I think so." She agreed softly. "You're saying that I should always keep in mind who I am and where I came from — that he doesn't outrank me in bloodline and that even if I am to be his wife, that doesn't mean I'm automatically his to use when he sees fit."

"Exactly." Sashi reached up to tuck a stray lock of Ouba's black hair behind her companion's ear. "You're far too pretty to be treated in such a cheap way — and if he truly wants your favours, he'll earn them. You're going there for politics, not for love. If you bear a son or you don't, it makes no difference to you. So the onus is on him, in the end. Let him earn you, Ouba — let him prove he's worthy of you before you give him your innocence. Once it's done, after all, you can't go back. And a Princess's virtue and honour is different from a Prince's."

"Women and men are always different, where honour is

concerned." Ouba acknowledged. "All right, Sashi. I'll remember. And I promise that I'll do as you say. I'm not going to make him think that Sairou's princesses are rude or un-obliging, but nor am I going to let him believe we're meek and lacking in our own will. As you say, for Sairou this agreement is in terms of trade. Kutou's Emperor must make the effort if Kutou want to add to the bargaining table the conception of a son and heir."

"Now you really do sound like your brother." Sashi laughed, an approving look in her dark eyes. "Your father's spirit runs through both of you, and he should be glad of it. Kintsusei-sama should be prepared, I think, for the consort Byakko is sending him."

"Perhaps he should." Ouba agreed, a faint smile touching her own lips. "I suppose we'll see as time goes on. There's a long and dangerous journey between now and then — and I'll only have Sayo and Kinka for company until we reach the Eastern lands."

"I thought that Reizeitei-sama of Kounan had extended to you the offer of accommodation in the South during your journey?" Sashi looked surprised. "Isn't that why you've elected to travel via that path and not through the North?"

"Yes, that's true." Ouba agreed. "But it's another strange court and Reizeitei-sama is an ally of Father's but a stranger to me, also. It's the same thing — Sayo and Kinka will be the only ones in whom I can completely trust my safety. Perhaps that will also be true within Kutou — it's too early yet to say."

"I've heard that Reizeitei-sama is very handsome." Sashi said teasingly. "Maybe you'll be led astray before you even reach the East. Perhaps that's his motive in so inviting you — what do you think?"

"Sashi!" Ouba reddened, shaking her head in embarrassment. "It's not like that. Reizeitei-sama simply wants to keep up good relations with Father and it's a logical thing for him to do, to offer hospitality to a travelling Princess from a land with whom his country have long had a strong alliance. He has not asked about me, nor have I anything to do with him, either. Kounan's tradition is to select a consort from within their own lands, after all. You shouldn't tease me — there will be no untoward behaviour in the South."

"Even so, aren't you curious?" Sashi asked. "To see this *bishounen-sama* that everyone's always talking about? His father Saihitei-sama was supposedly very handsome too, and Reizeitei-sama is rumoured to take after him. Aren't you even a tiny bit interested to see if the stories are true?"

“Not really.” Ouba shook her head. “You’re married and I’m all but betrothed. It’s nothing to do with us.”

“Spoilsport.” Sashi pouted. “Fine, have it your way. But at least write to me from Eiyou and tell me if the stories are exaggerations. You might not bother about it, but I’m curious about court gossip as much as the next lady of Sairou.”

“Fine, if you want.” Ouba said resignedly. “I’ll do my best. But it will only be a flying visit. I can’t imagine there’ll be any reason to spend much time there. We’re going to Kutou and as quickly as we’re able — Sayo won’t allow us to linger anyplace we don’t need to.”

“No, that’s probably true.” Sashi agreed. “But you’re lucky Nefuru spared him to go, Ouba-chan. We’ll miss him, in his absence.”

“I’m grateful that he did.” Ouba admitted. “I know I’ll feel much safer with Sayo and Kinka both by my side.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

"Yeesh, I thought morning classes were never going to end."

Arina flipped open the lid of her desk, pushing her text-books inside with a heavy sigh. Despite her words to Keisuke, she knew that she had been unforgivably distracted that morning, and that she would probably wind up borrowing someone else's notes to catch up on the latest complicated maths rule that their teacher had chosen to inflict on them.

As she went to close her desk, she caught sight of the faded old notebook poking out from underneath the texts and she grinned ruefully, hesitating then scooping it up. She had not meant to bring it to school with her, but something about its old-fashioned simplicity had lured her into doing so, and she glanced at it, realising that it was lunchtime and that she had a good hour or so in which to read.

"Arina!"

As she set the old notebook down on the desk, a voice called her name and she glanced up, smiling as she caught the gaze of two of her high school classmates. She raised her hand in a wave and the two girls came towards her, one of them with a lunch box under her arm and the other with her purse already in her hand.

"Are you coming to get lunch?" The girl with the purse asked. "It's blowing up a storm outside — did you bring food or are you coming to the cafeteria to join the scramble?"

"I'm not that hungry, actually." Arina admitted. "I was just going to go to the library and do some, er, reading."

"Reading?" The second girl stared at her. "Again? Ari-chan, you're getting disturbingly bookish, do you know that? Don't you already spend enough time in libraries with your part time job at the city one?"

"I suppose so." Arina admitted. "But this isn't school work, exactly. It's a favour for a friend — someone from Hi-chan's family, and I have to get the books back to him pretty soon. Since the weather out isn't great, it seems like as good a time as any."

"Hi-chan?" The first girl looked nonplussed, and the second one

sighed, grabbing Arina by the shoulders and giving her a little shake.

"Hikari moved away over a year ago." She said bluntly. "And how much have you heard from her since then? I don't understand your fixation with old, dead friendships, Ari. Hikari was someone you went to middle school with, but you didn't know her before that and it shouldn't bother you so much that she's not here now. She obviously doesn't care, so why should you?"

"Because she's my friend, Kyouko." Arina pulled back, casting the other girl a reproachful look. "And there are circumstances. I'm sure it's not Hi-chan's fault she hasn't been in contact recently. She's gone a long way away, you know — it's not easy, making so many changes."

Kyouko frowned.

"I liked Hikari enough when she was with us in middle school." She admitted slowly. "But listen to yourself, Ari. Hikari transferred to a different middle school half way through our final year. She hasn't been seen or heard of in Tokyo since then — but it's not like she moved planets. If she wanted to get in touch there's the internet, fax, phone — even snail mail. I know she's staying with friends of her Dad's — surely they haven't locked her up and thrown away the key?"

"No… I guess not." Arina sighed, shaking her head. "It's just… more complicated than that. Okay? But I believe in her and she and I are still friends, even if she ain't in school with us any more. Besides, I can't believe you've discarded her that easily either, Kyou-chan. Chieki I can understand, because she didn't know Hi-chan and won't remember anything about her. But you knew her longer than I did — have you really just forgotten?"

"She's forgotten us." Kyouko said simply. "She's got new friends and a new life in whatever distant part of Japan she's living in now."

"She's not in Japan." Arina snapped back, and Kyouko faltered, staring at her friend in confusion.

"Huh? Not in… but I thought she'd gone to stay with someone in the… in the south?"

"That *is* what you said, Ari." Chieki agreed, shifting her lunchbox absently from hand to hand as she regarded her classmate curiously. "Are you saying that wasn't true?"

"No, it's true." Arina rubbed her temples. "I said she'd gone south and I meant it. But it's not… in Japan. It's… further away than that. And the people she's staying with don't… don't have a lot of money or ways to communicate over… overseas, I suppose. So it's not so easy as

that for Hi-chan to get in touch. Really, it's not. It's just how things are… I'm sure it's not that she doesn't want to contact us."

"Then where is she?" Kyouko looked confused. "South… where? Australia? The Phillipines? Where are we talking about?"

Arina was silent for a moment, then she sighed heavily.

"China." She said at length. "It's… somewhere in… China. Sukunami-san's friends are… are Chinese."

"China?" Chieki's eyes opened wide with surprise. "Does Hikari speak Chinese?"

"No, but the people she's staying with speak Japanese." Arina said slowly. "At least, the guy does. I met him, before Hi-chan left. I don't know about the others."

"Why in hell would Hikari have taken off to China all of a sudden?" Kyouko demanded. "Arina-chan, do you know something I don't?"

"Who knows?" Arina said cryptically. "All I can tell you is that it has something to do with her family and an interest in Ancient Chinese culture. Nothing else. Just that."

"And that's why you're suddenly in the library all the time." Chieki's dark eyes lit up with understanding. "You're reading up on this shit so that if and when you go visit her you don't look like a complete idiot! Am I right?"

"I suppose so." Arina agreed. "Although I guess I'm still hoping that one day she'll come back."

"In time for University, you mean?"

"Mm, I guess."

"Arina's talking about university." Amusement glittered in Kyouko's dark eyes. "You know, if Hikari did come back now, Ari-chan, she might not even know you. You've become all smart and grade-conscious since we finished middle school… almost as if you had a brain transplant or something in the meantime."

"Don't be stupid." Despite herself Arina flushed red. "It's not like that. It's just… I'm not going to depend on my father's credit cards forever. I'm seventeen now, right? I gotta think about my future and stuff sometime… don't I?"

"You never bothered about his money before." Chieki pointed out, and Arina shrugged.

“Sure, but it’s a bit sad to be always trailing after Papa’s purse strings.” She said frankly. “I don’t want to be one of *those* kids.”

“So let me guess — you’re going to graduate and go to university and study dusty old Ancient Chinese fossils.” Kyouko bantered. “And then you’re going to hop round obscure archaeological sites all over Asia trying to find whatever artefact from whatever dynasty to finish off some museum’s prized collection. Am I right?”

“Maybe.” Arina admitted. “It’s not as dusty or boring as it seems, to be honest. There’s a lot… I don’t know, it seems like there’s a lot of *life* involved in it. It’s sort of compulsion-forming. Besides, it’s not just history I’m interested in. It’s the theology and the astrology, too.”

“Astrology I can understand.” Chieki reflected. “Everyone wants to know what’s written in their stars, after all.”

“Yeah.” Arina agreed. “I guess I never realised it before, but stars are pretty powerful things, aren’t they? If they really can dictate things in people’s lives.”

“Almost like guardian angels. Or devils. Whichever.” Kyouko laughed, and Arina allowed herself a rueful grin.

“Whichever.” She echoed. “Yeah. Just like that.”

She shrugged.

“I’ll catch up with you both later.” She added, tucking the aging notebook under her arm as she did so. “Don’t spend or eat too much!”

Before either of her friends could react, she had slipped out of the classroom, an amused smile touching her lips as she hurried along the hallways to the school’s big sprawling library. Before Hikari had left Tokyo for good, she reflected, she would have rather have been seen dead than in a library. But these days she found something soothing and reassuring in their quiet solitude, and she secluded herself in her favourite alcove, setting her treasure down on the desk in front of her as she glanced once more at the faded covers.

“I wonder what you’re going to tell me, Suzuno-san.” She murmured. “Well, I guess there’s no time like the present to find out.”

Slowly she opened the book, glancing at the introduction page briefly for a moment, then turning over to the next sheet. As she did so, she thought she saw a faint glitter of white light touch the pages and she frowned, squinting at the faded old paper as she did so. Although Keisuke had told her it was a diary, she could not make out a single word on the first page, and as she skimmed through the book

she realised that all of it appeared to be blank.

"That's weird." She muttered, turning back to the beginning. "Keisuke-san wouldn't give me a blank notebook. He wouldn't play a trick on me like that. So what… it can't have got messed up just being in my room, surely? There's been noone to do any damage to it. Maybe it's just so faded out I'm not seeing it. Surely there must be something written here — Keisuke-san must have seen a reason for me to have it, after all."

She frowned, running her finger absently along the top line of the first page. As she did so, she glanced down at the paper, and froze, her heart stilling in her chest as, where her finger had been, the slow, black curl of inked letters had begun to form themselves on the page.

"Too, too weird." She breathed. "Keisuke-san said it wasn't a magic book, or *that* book. So why…? I don't understand. Why is Suzuno-san's book all freaky? It's just a diary. It's not like it's a spell book."

No sooner had the thought had crossed her mind, however, when her head was flooded with images, and she let out a gasp as suddenly her vision seemed to grow very bright. In the centre of the page which had, moments earlier been blank seemed to stir the tiniest flicker of an image, and as she stared at it, the image grew bigger and bigger until it seemed to engulf Arina's entire psyche, slipping into her thoughts as smoothly and completely as if she had been touched by the tendrils of an engrossing, vivid dream. The library appeared to disappear into nothing as Arina suddenly found her whole world becoming swallowed up by the whirling, crazy dervish of a desert sandstorm, a howling wind sending grains of dust swirling across her vision as she struggled to see beyond.

Then, as she saw the huddled figure of a girl crouched, shaking on the ground, she felt something surge through her heart, stilling its beat for the briefest of seconds as someone else's memories took control of her thoughts.

"Are you all right?"

In the hazy swirl of the desert storm, Suzuno struggled to make out the shadowy outline of an individual, shielding her eyes as best she could from the dust and sand that whirled mercilessly around her. The specks of mineral deposit grazed against her skin, but she did not notice the pain, too frightened and disorientated by her unfamiliar surroundings to really register the situation.

At her lack of answer, the figure drew closer, dropping down beside her, and faintly Suzuno was aware of a blanket being tossed over her, as

someone tried to shield her from the sharp shards of sand.

"This isn't the kind of place you should be." The voice spoke again, his accent soft and somehow soothing to her rattled senses, and she turned her head towards the voice, trying to make out features in the whirl of grey and brown. For a brief moment she met the other's vivid gaze, then, as if she was no more than a sack of potatoes, the stranger hoisted her up in his arms. Suzuno opened her mouth to protest or scream, but instead she choked as the dry dust of the storm invaded her airways, and the man muttered a curse, gripping her more tightly to his body as he turned against the wind.

"Don't struggle. I'm not going to hurt you." He said softly, and Suzuno felt a sudden warmth to his grip as at last his words began to pierce her dazed panic. Before she could catch her breath, however, everything had whirled and swum away from her vision once more, and she closed her eyes tightly, half afraid she was about to be sick.

Within a few moments, although to the bewildered Suzuno it seemed like hours, the twisting and shaking had stopped, and as she felt herself being dumped down onto something soft and uneven, she drew a gulping breath into her lungs, realising as she did so that she was no longer surrounded by the choking cloak of the dust storm. She sucked in another breath, aware that her whole body was juddering and trembling with the shock as she struggled to keep her balance.

"You look sort of rough, kid." The voice was there again, and Suzuno was dimly aware of a hand on her shoulder. "Open your eyes, huh? It's safe enough here. No dust or sand inside my home… granted it mightn't be the richest place in all of Sairou, but it'll do."

Something in the stranger's matter-of-fact tones struck through Suzuno's fear, bringing her back to her senses and her eyes snapped open as she gazed up at her companion in confusion and dismay.

What she saw brought her little comfort, for a stranger stared back at her, his broad arms folded casually across his chest as he sized her up from top to bottom. Hair the colour of snow spiked out across his head, falling in a narrow tail down his back, and his eyes, a vivid amber in hue were fixed intently on her, glittering with life and an interest that somehow made Suzuno wary. Gold hoops hung at his ears, giving him an almost gypsyish appearance, and as Suzuno stared at him she realised she had never seen anyone even remotely like him in her short, sheltered life. He was dressed in unfamiliar clothing that vaguely resembled some of the pictures she remembered seeing among her father and Okuda Einosuke's papers, and on the olive-tanned skin of his cheek she could see the faint glittering of something white. A tattoo or something, perhaps, she reflected absently.

After all, had she not heard stories about wild tribesmen from distant lands branding their skin with marks of their Gods in order to gain divine blessing?

This thought reignited her fear somewhat, as she wondered whether this stranger was truly as savage as the people she had read about in her father's newspapers. Something in the intense scrutiny of his gold eyes unnerved her, and she darted her gaze away, taking in instead the room in which she now found herself.

It was, as the man had said, simple in its furnishings and not overly large, though it was strong and secure against the buffetting wind of the desert storm that still howled and whirled outside. A fire burned in one corner, sending up occasional sparks into the ether, and the chamber was lit by flame lamps at the corners, since the windows had been securely shuttered against the harsh weather conditions. Beyond she could make out the shadow of another doorway that led into a further room, and as she spread her hands around her, she felt the rough woven fabric of the hand-crafted rug on which she had been dropped. For a moment she fingered it, gazing at the unfamiliar pattern without comprehension, taking in as she did so the scattering of sand that lightly dusted the chamber's cold stone floor.

For a moment, silence reigned between them, then the stranger grinned, a wicked twinkle of humour entering his gaze.

"Well, you're alive." He said reflectively. "And you're not so much of the kid as I thought you were, are you? Almost a young woman, in fact. Is it my lucky day, to pluck a dust-maiden from a sandstorm? I guess there had to be a reward for all my hard work of late. Guess this is it, huh?"

"Who… who are you?" At last Suzuno found her voice, hating how unsettled and strange she sounded as she struggled to find some vestige of her composure. "Where is this… where have you brought me? What do you want?"

"That's an awful lot of questions considering I just saved your life." Humour sparked into the stranger's gaze, and in a moment Suzuno realised he was not so very much older than her, his build and swagger having initially deceived her. "Or do you like inhaling desert sand?"

He eyed her scrutinously, then,

*"You're dressed pretty weird for desert-walking." He added. "**I** should be asking who **you** are. Strikes me you're not from these parts at all, are you? You must be pretty lost if you wandered over a border, mind — we're quite a way from any country divides here. This desert stretches for miles before you'll reach Hokkan — and the nearest city is a good couple of hours*

walk."

Suzuno gazed at him uncertainly, and the man sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

"Fine." He said frankly. "I'll go first, then you can tell me who you are… does that sound like a fair trade to you?"

"I…" Suzuno faltered, and the man smirked.

"I'll take that as a yes." He reflected. "Hamu. That's my name. Hamu Ranva. Now you?"

"…O… Oosugi Suzuno." Suzuno said falteringly.

"Suzuno-chan, huh?" Her companion looked interested. "Sure as hell doesn't sound like a Sairou name, kid… at least not from these parts. All this area is my clan's land… you're really not from round here, are you?"

"I… don't know… where here is." Suzuno admitted falteringly. "I was… in Papa's study. And then… I was… in a desert. And then… you…"

She swallowed hard, still able to taste dust and grit on her tongue.

"Did you really save my life?" She whispered. "How did we get from the storm… to here?"

"Trade secret." Ranva winked at her. "Though it sounds like you've a few of your own, since you managed to get into the desert in the first place."

"I really don't know how." Suzuno admitted, hugging her knees to her chest. "Ranva-san, please… tell me. Where… is… here?"

"Sairou." Even Ranva looked confused by this question. "You really are out of it — you don't even know what country you're in?"

"Sairou." Suzuno repeated the word softly to herself, then she shook her head.

"I really don't know where that is." She confessed. "I wasn't ever very good at remembering names of places, but even so I don't think I've heard it before. But… you said… Hokkan? Is that… what you said before?"

"Yes, that's right." Ranva crossed his legs, eying her quizzically. "Is that where you're from? The North?"

"No…" Suzuno shook her head. "No, but I've heard that word before. I don't know how, I can't quite remember why. But it means something. I just don't know exactly what. It's not that I've been there, but I almost feel like someone told me about it. That somehow I knew… oh, this doesn't make any sense!"

She groaned, burying her head in her hands as she fought against the rising sense of panic that welled up inside of her. Her long thick braids of hair fell down alongside her face as she did so, and Ranva leant across to grasp one of them in his calloused fingers, tweaking it gently.

"Well, you're in luck." He said matter of factly, as she raised her gaze to his once more. "I only offer sanctuary to pretty girls, but you've passed the test. You can stay until the storm passes, after all. A kid as pretty as you can't possibly be up to mischief, after all."

"Don't pull my hair." Suzuno extracted her braid from his grip, glaring at him indignantly. "Just because you saved my life doesn't mean you can touch me when you like, you know."

"Well, so you have spunk as well." Ranva seemed amused. "All right, Suzuno-chan. I've got the message. You're quite the proper young lady after all, huh?"

"You're teasing me." Suzuno blushed furiously, folding her arms indignantly as her annoyance replaced her homesickness. "Papa would be horrified if he heard anyone talk to me like that, you know."

"I'm not really liking your Papa too much." Ranva responded evenly. "Don't be a spoilsport, Suzuno-chan. I'm only playing with you."

"Well, don't." Suzuno shot back. "And I didn't say you could call me Suzuno-chan, either. You've just met me — noone said you could be so informal."

"Yeesh, you sound like the daughter of some imperial lackey." Ranva rolled his eyes. "Please tell me you didn't fall out of a royal carriage or something… that's all I'd need, to have my knuckles rapped by the Emperor for messing with one of his court's pampered pets. Although if you were, I suppose there is the matter of my saving your life. Oosugi, is that what you said your name was? I wonder if there is someone at Meishitei-heika's court by that name."

"Meishitei-who?" Suzuno's eyes widened. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know anything about any Emperor, except the Emperor of Japan. And I've never met him — I only know about him from Papa's newspapers and pictures and things like that. I don't know why you'd think I would know him — you're really strange, do you know that?"

*"Right back at you." Ranva returned neatly. "All right, Suzuno-**san**. Enough of this. You know how to cook?"*

"Of course I do!" Suzuno exclaimed hotly. "What do you think I am?"

"Good." Ranva grinned. "Because it's getting late, and I'm sure you're as famished as I am."

"I'm not your housemaid!"

"No, but you do owe me." Ranva said unrepentantly. "So it'd be the ladylike thing to do, to feed a poor desert man who risked his life to save hers."

Suzuno scowled, but as she made to retort, she realised that the white haze she had noticed on his left cheek had now faded and disappeared. At her hesitation, Ranva cocked his head on one side, eying her keenly.

"What is it?" He asked. "Have you just realised how handsome I am, or is something else offending you now?"

"No." Suzuno bristled slightly at his off-hand remark, knowing he was teasing her again. "Just… when I got here, you had something… I'm sure you had something on your cheek. But now it's gone."

"My cheek, huh?" Ranva looked surprised, instinctively reaching up a finger to brush his left cheek. He smiled ruefully, shrugging his shoulders.

"You must've imagined it." He said casually. "Well, what about that food? Are you really going to refuse to repay your debt, Suzuno-san?"

"I didn't imagine it." Suzuno snapped back. "And you know exactly what I'm talking about, even if you say you don't. I'm not cooking anything until you tell me what's going on. It was there when we came here, but it's not there now. And I want to know why. Nothing makes any sense — at least tell me the truth!"

"I told you. Imagination. Shock. One of the two." Ranva shook his head. "Girls are prone to hysterical fits — at least, some girls. You were in a state when I found you, too. After all…"

*"After all, when I said it, you immediately touched your **left** cheek." Suzuno shot back. "But I didn't tell you which cheek I saw it on. Did I? I just said it was on your cheek. You know exactly what I'm talking about — so stop treating me like I'm a stupid little girl! I'm not, all right? I'm sixteen and I'm old enough to know when someone's trying to patronise me!"*

At the sharp tone in her voice, Ranva's eyes opened wide with surprise, then, ruefully he laughed.

"You're back in your wits all right now, I see." He said, a grudging amount of respect in his tones. "All right. You win — I suppose you have me there. But I didn't want to scare you. People react about it differently, depending on who they are. It isn't something I can easily hide, you see — when it comes it comes, and when it doesn't, it doesn't. Usually when I'm

doing something dashing and heroic it appears — which means it's there a fair bit, as I'm sure you can imagine. But I didn't realise you'd seen it too. If I tell you, you have to promise not to freak."

"I'm not freaking. Tell me." Suzuno said firmly, and Ranva shrugged.

"It's Byakko's mark." He said simply.

Suzuno frowned.

"Byakko's mark?"

"Yes." Ranva agreed. "One of the stellar signs of Byakko. Hell, kid, don't tell me you don't know that legend either? The Tiger God Byakko, the Seven stellar warriors, the Miko who'll one day come and save us all from destruction, yada yada? You said you knew something about Hokkan — surely you've heard about Genbu no Miko and the Genbu Shichi Seishi? This is the same deal, only it hasn't all kicked off and happened yet."

He touched his cheek again.

"This is proof that when that Miko comes, Byakko'll call me." He added. "But nothing's come of it yet except people making comments about what they think is a slave scar on my face when they first see it. And it's caused me no end of hell at times, with some of the superstitious people in these parts."

He frowned, as Suzuno bit her lip, cold dread flooding through her heart.

"Hey, what's with you?" He demanded. "Don't tell me you're going to go wuss on me now? You promised!"

"Genbu no Miko." Suzuno whispered, clenching her hands tightly together as she stared at him in dismay. "Genbu no Miko… was Okuda Takiko, wasn't she?"

"Something like that, probably." Ranva looked confused. "I don't really know all the details. Just that some girl came, raised Genbu, saved Hokkan and toddled back to her world. That was a hundred years ago, and Hokkan have been at peace ever since. Pretty sweet deal, as far as I can see."

Suzuno swallowed hard, suddenly feeling sick again.

"Takiko-neechan." She murmured. "It ***was*** *you. This… this place I'm in is the same as the place you went to, isn't it? This book is the book Okuda-sensei tried so hard to get Papa to destroy. The one he warned me not to go near — the one which made Okuda-sensei lose his wits and kill Takiko-neechan and then himself. That's it, isn't it? I've come into Takiko-*

neechan's book… and now… what's going to happen to me?"

"You've lost me." Ranva's brows knotted together. "What are you babbling about now?"

"Okuda Takiko was someone I knew." Suzuno swallowed again. "She was a friend. Her father and mine were friends for a long time. But when I was younger, she disappeared. And then, when she came back, she was… ill. Somehow. And her father killed her to stop her from suffering any more pain. Then he killed himself. It was a huge scandal. Papa tried to shield me from the worst of it, but I still knew. I still knew that Okuda-sensei had killed Takiko-neechan and that it had had something to do with something called Genbu and this book. This… ShijinTenchishou. Papa told me never to go near it, but I… somehow I…"

She faltered, trailing off, and Ranva grasped her by the shoulders, giving her a little shake.

"Whatever this Takiko person you're talking about is or isn't, there's no way you could have met Hokkan's Miko." He said firmly. "Didn't you hear me? It was a hundred years or more ago. You're sixteen, you said so yourself. How could you know someone who lived as long ago as that?"

"I don't know." Suzuno said faintly. "But this ***is*** *the ShijinTenchishou… isn't it?"*

"I've heard that word before." Ranva agreed. "But even so…"

"I'm in the book world." Suzuno buried her head in her hands once more, tears of grief and fear mingling on her cheeks as she registered the true nature of her situation. "I've come into Takiko-neechan's book world and now I'm going to die, just like she did."

"You're melodramatic all of a sudden." Ranva eyed her keenly. "Look, kid, you've only been through a little dust dervish. And noone's going to throw you to any wild wolves. I'm not that kind of person, whatever you think of me."

"No…" Suzuno bit her lip, dashing away her tears. "I'm sorry, Ranva-san. I know it doesn't make sense to you. How could it? But Takiko-neechan came to this world from another place. Didn't she? You said she went back to her world… didn't you?"

"Far as I know." Ranva looked non-plussed. "I'm Sairou-jin, Suzuno-chan. And I wasn't here a century ago to hear the gossip when it happened. What of it?"

"That's where I came here from." Suzuno's voice shook. "That place Takiko-neechan came from. Genbu no Miko. I came from the same place. I

was there, and then… then I was here. Just like Takiko-neechan, I got pulled here without my knowing it was going to happen. And now I don't know how to get back or what to do. I don't know anything about this place and I'm scared."

For a moment there was silence, as slowly Ranva digested her words. Colour and humour had faded from his face too, Suzuno realised, and she took a deep breath, somewhat unnerved by this sudden change in her companion's demeanour.

At length, Ranva spoke, getting to his feet as he slowly pulled her to hers.

"Look at me." He commanded roughly, and, startled by his tone, Suzuno did as she was bidden, her eyes still swimming with tears. Ranva sighed, reaching a finger up to brush away the fresh storms, and through her blurred vision Suzuno made out the glitter of white light once more on her companion's left cheek.

"You mean that, don't you?" He said softly. "That you came here from Genbu no Miko's world? That you, somehow, knew Genbu no Miko? You suddenly appeared in Sairou… but you didn't come over the border to get here? You came from a whole other world a million miles away from this village…?"

Wordlessly Suzuno nodded, and Ranva's lips thinned as if he was fighting something out within himself. Then he sighed heavily, touching his tear-dampened index finger to the mark that shimmered against his olive skin. As her tears connected with the character, it seemed to blaze even more strongly, and Ranva muttered a curse, shaking his head.

"I don't want to believe it." He said unwillingly. "But I don't think I can ignore it. That's why I was called to the desert like that. Why I was driven to go that way through the sand even though a storm was brewing. Why I was drawn to save you, and use my skills to bring you here and offer you shelter, even though you're dressed like a foreign heathen and you talk no sense. This is why, isn't it? Because you came from the Miko's world. Which means only one thing."

"Which is?" Suzuno murmured, and Ranva cupped her chin in his hands.

"Only Mikos come from the Miko's world." He said softly. "And when I touched my cheek with your tears just then, I felt it burn through me like someone had set fire to my blood. Our meeting wasn't a coincidence — it was destiny. ***You're*** *the one that Byakko called here… the one who's going to save Sairou from destruction. Aren't you? You're the chosen one — you're Byakko no Miko."*

*"**Me**?" Suzuno looked horrified, and Ranva nodded his head.*

"You." He said, no trace of a joke on his face as he eyed her sombrely. "And that being the case, I think we ought to do the introductions over again."

He tapped his cheek.

"This is the character 'kei'." He said gravely. "I told you already it was Byakko's mark. And if you are who I think you are, this suddenly has a meaning that it never had before."

"Meaning…?"

"Yes." Ranva nodded. He hesitated, then bowed his head slightly towards her.

"It's the symbol of Tokaki." He said frankly, raising his golden gaze to her fearful dark one as he did so. "And from hereon in, I guess that's who I must be. So let me introduce myself one more time, Miko-sama."

He held out his hand and, very hesitantly, Suzuno took his fingers in hers.

"My name is Tokaki." Ranva said gravely. "Tokaki of the Byakko Shichi Seishi. And if you're really Byakko no Miko, then there's someone else you really ought to meet."

"Arina-chan?"

A voice startled Arina from her daze and she blinked, glancing up to see the concerned gaze of the school librarian gazing down at her.

"Hashiba-sensei." She murmured faintly, struggling into a sitting position as she rubbed her eyes, trying to get a hold of her bearings. "What…"

"You fell asleep." The librarian eyed her keenly. "Are you working too hard, Arina-chan? You're in here a lot lately — I know you're going into your final year next year, but…"

"Asleep?" Arina stared, returning to her senses with a jolt as she registered her surroundings properly. "A dream?"

"You were pretty far out." Her companion smiled, shaking her head in amusement. "The bell just rang for afternoon class, however. You'd better take your book and run, else you're going to be late."

"Damn." Arina's eyes widened and she scrambled to her feet, scooping up Suzuno's diary as she did so. "Thank you, sensei. I owe you one. And don't worry — I won't work too hard!"

With that she was gone, glad the teacher had not asked too many questions. However, as she made her way through the bustling hallways towards her homeroom, a thought nagged at the back of her mind.

"A dream, after all?" She wondered aloud, glancing down at the cover of Suzuno's worn notebook. "Or was it… something else? Suzuno-san, were you trying to show me… a *memory*?"

Writer's note:
Woot, so the legend (re)begins XD

As for why it's Tokaki — basically I got sick of the Miko getting pulled into the other world and immediately meeting the 'love interest'. Miaka had Tamahome. Takiko had Uruki. And I guess to some degree Yui had Nakago, albeit in a very twisted and wrong kind of way. So I was resolved that in my story, Suzuno was going to meet a different Seishi when she arrived in the book. The meeting with Tatara is yet to come in a few chapters time ;)

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

"Enter, Kei Kinka."

As the Prince's words came through the thick wood-panelled doors, Kinka gathered her wits, taking a deep breath to compose herself as she placed her palms against the cool, smooth surface. Inwardly she uttered a prayer for courage, then, carefully she pushed the divide back, stepping into the chamber and dropping down on the floor before the Prince's desk.

Nefuru got to his feet, eying her for a moment, and to begin with silence filled the room. Then, a length, he sighed.

"Stand." He said softly, and Kinka raised her gaze to his troubled ones, obediently getting to her feet.

"You sent for me, Nefuru-sama?" She asked quietly, and Nefuru nodded, chewing his lip as he gestured for her to approach the desk. She did so, reading the tension in the young royal's bearing and expression. Inwardly she wondered whether Rouhei had confided everything in his childhood friend, or whether it was simply Nefuru's love for his younger sister that had made him so uncharacteristically uneasy and on edge.

"In an hour or two, you will accompany my sister from this place to the palace of Kutou." He said gravely. "Rouhei has assured me your skills are up to the task of protecting her and I have no choice but to put my faith in his word. Ouba is very dear to many people, Kinka — do you understand how much of a burden this responsibility will be?"

"Yes, Oujisama. I understand." Kinka said soberly. "Ouba-hime is very dear to me too, after all. There's nothing I wouldn't do or sacrifice to protect her safety. You can be assured of that — I won't let her down."

Nefuru eyed her for a moment, then a faint smile touched his lips and he reached across to touch Kinka on the shoulder.

"You speak from the heart, and it reassures me." He admitted. "Even so, though, I'm aware that you are young yourself still. And that you too must sacrifice your friendships and support networks here to go with Ouba to her new home. You will probably not have much

occasion to return, Kinka — you will not be in as close proximity to Rouhei and his guidance when you are in the East. Are you confident in your skill and ability to act independantly of his advice? I know he has trained you and guided you since the unfortunate incident that brought the Kei-ke's position crumbling down. But has it been long enough for you to be able to act decisively without being given the order?"

Kinka frowned for a moment, her aquamarine eyes clouding.

"Oujisama, are you asking me whether I am too green to do my duty, or whether my Kei loyalties may surface without the involvement of Rouhei-sama and his kindness in my life?" She asked softly, and Nefuru looked taken aback, staring at her in surprise.

"Kinka…"

"I may still carry the name of Kei, because I have no other to lay claim to." Kinka said levelly, meeting the Prince's gaze with a resolute one of her own. "I am Kei Kinka till I die, and I cannot avoid the unfortunate associations such a name might carry. It's true that my father was once someone I cared for, but he made his choices and I… I made mine. You may see his features in my face, Nefuru-sama, but his heart and mine could not be further apart. I have been trained by Rouhei-sama to follow my mother's people and their ways. Rouhei-sama has compared me to a true member of the Han-ke many times. No matter how much I look like Kei Engai's daughter, you have my honest assurance that that is where the likeness ends."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I have no residual loyalty or affection for the greed and selfishness of traitors to Heiboutei-heika's crown." She added coldly. "My life is Ouba-hime's, and Rouhei-sama has trained me in all ways to ensure that I can and will protect the Princess to the best of my ability. Even if my father's own spirit was to rise up before me, I would not falter before him. I am not like him."

Nefuru sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"I'm sorry." He said contritely. "I didn't mean to insinuate that. I don't believe you a traitor, Kinka. I know that you were badly affected when your father abandoned you and I know that you look on Rouhei with the ultimate respect. I am just… concerned. The safety of my beloved sister is in the hands of an eighteen year old girl. You must see my fear. She is to go far away — to a place where I can no longer defend her from harm."

At these honest words, Kinka felt her anger fade, and she bowed her head towards the prince.

“So long as I’m alive, Nefuru-sama, you have my word that nothing will befall Ouba-hime.” She said gravely. “I may be only eighteen, but I have worked hard and I will not let anyone down. I owe many things to your honoured family and to Rouhei-sama for protecting me from falling when my father gambled and lost everything for his own greed’s sake. I will repay that debt or die in the attempt, so you needn’t worry.”

“I have no desire to sacrifice your life either, Kinka.” Nefuru said frankly, and despite herself Kinka smiled, nodding her head.

“I either.” She acknowledged. “I would be of scant little use to Ouba-hime dead, after all. But if the occasion arose, I would not hesitate to do what was necessary for her survival. I’m not easy to kill, Nefuru-sama. I’ve been trained in all the arts of the Han-ke. I understand the tricks and techniques that my mother’s family have used from the shadows to serve the royal house for generations. Even though I am just a girl, please don’t underestimate me. I am a lot stronger than I look, and quite as determined as any man.”

Nefuru laughed.

“Yes, you are Rouhei’s protegee, no doubt about it.” He reflected. “You are right, Kinka. You carry Kei Engai’s features, but you speak with all the loyalty and heart of a member of the Han-ke. Rouhei has indeed done well where you are concerned. I feel somewhat comforted, seeing the steely resolve in your gaze.”

His voice softened.

“Kinka, Ouba is the most precious thing to many people here at Sairou’s court.” He said quietly. “To me, to my father… my mother… and many courtiers consider her beloved of the West. Her marriage is a good match — an honourable one for a Princess of her birth and status, and I knew one day that it must come. I have learnt as much as I could about Kintsusei of Kutou and I am reassured by the reports, but Kutou is still a dangerous land where uncertainty lingers beneath the surface. Ouba will have noone but you to turn to in times of loneliness or need. And I… I will rely on you too, to report back to our court the Princess’s progress and well-being. Even if she is so far away, I don’t want to lose all communication with my sister. And I know that, no matter how she is feeling, she will not write negatively when she sends letters home. She holds the pride of Sairou in her heart, after all. She will want to keep it burning no matter what the

adversity."

"I have already promised Rouhei-sama to make report at least once in each month, or more frequently if the need arises." Kinka assured him. "And I came here this morning ready to swear by my blood that my loyalty is to you and Ouba-hime until I die. No matter what else might get in the way."

"No matter what else…" Nefuru faltered, then he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Rouhei has spoken to you, hasn't he? About the stars and how he thinks their movements should be interpreted." He reflected. Kinka's eyes clouded, and she nodded.

"Yes, Oujisama. He has." She agreed gravely.

"And you believe his conviction as strongly as he does?"

"Perhaps more, my Lord." Kinka glanced at her hands, then back up at her companion. "I have seen with my own eyes the white glint of Byakko's mark across the skin of one of his chosen."

Nefuru blanched,and Kinka could tell he was resisting the urge to grab her by the shoulders at these words.

"Then it is true." He whispered. "Byakko no Miko will return, there will once more be battle in Sairou. Rouhei is as accurate as he's ever been."

He cast Kinka a sharp look.

"This chosen of Byakko is one known to both you and Rouhei, isn't it?" He demanded sharply, and Kinka hesitated, then slowly nodded her head.

"Yes, my Prince." She agreed. "But please don't ask me to reveal any more information to you than that. I have given Rouhei-sama my word to leave it in his hands and to his discretion and I don't want to leave here with my last act being my disobedience to his wishes. He is better placed to advise you than I am. And I… I am here to protect Ouba-hime. That's my concern, nothing else."

"Of course." Nefuru seemed to get a grip on himself, nodding his head. "As you say, I will have Rouhei to advise if the moment arises. I should be comforted to know that, if disaster is threatening the West again, Byakko has already begun to mobilise some form of defence against it. You are right… it is not your place to make report to me about such delicate matters as this."

Kinka did not respond, and Nefuru smiled faintly.

“You came to swear by blood before me.” He said quietly, reaching across to pull open a desk drawer at his right hand. Carefully he extracted a short-bladed dagger, the hilt carved from ivory and set with amber and diamond mined from the Kanin mountains over a century before. The blade was distinctive, a classical Sairou style of weapon presented to those who had completed training and been acknowledged as warriors within Sairou’s mixed-tribe culture, and across the very tip of the blade was the carefully engraved image of the tiger’s snarling head, his fangs bared as he roared his defiance against the West’s enemies. The metal ore came from deep below Sairou’s arid desert, chosen because of the white glow it emitted when smelted and moulded into the shape of a blade. The weapons were blessed and purified by Byakko’s priests in the holy fires of the Tiger’s shrines, and Kinka knew that the engraving had been done painstakingly by one whose devotion to the Tiger was undenied.

Nefuru pushed the blade across the desk, eying Kinka expectantly, and slowly the girl picked it up, running her finger over the silver metal gently as she eyed Byakko’s likeness with more intent than usual. Nefuru frowned, and Kinka knew he was remembering the day he had been presented with the blade. It had been a day of great pride for him, she knew — a boy of fifteen who had finally reached the point of acceptance as a man and Prince of his father’s court. Rouhei had also been presented with one that day, sealing the two young men’s loyalty to one another and to Sairou in one symbolic gesture. Rouhei had told her the story in some detail, when she had asked about his rapport with the young Prince, and through his account, Kinka had come to understand the significance of the simple, if beautifully crafted weapon.

Although these daggers were scarce ever used in conflict, their blessed status meant that they were often used for sealing blood pacts of loyalty between vassal and lord, and the ultimate oath of loyalty was one taken before a member of the Imperial house, by a knife owned by a Prince or a King. Kinka knew that Rouhei also still bore the faint scar across the back of his left hand where he had submitted his blood to Nefuru’s blade. It was something he spoke of with pride, although he was not given to overreaching sentimentality, and Kinka’s heart skipped a beat as she realised she was being asked to make the same promise. Though many swore allegiance to Nefuru and his father by their own blades in battle, only those most trusted of the Imperial family were asked to swear loyalty by shedding their blood across a blessed dagger.

“Father had one of these, once.” At length she spoke, glancing at the Prince with a sober look in her aquamarine eyes. “I know he did, because I saw it in his study once or twice. But when the soldiers came, they confiscated it and the blade was melted down for scrap. This is an honoured blade, my Prince… are you sure you want to sully it with the blood of such a family?”

“As you’ve already told me, you consider yourself Han-ke, not Kei-ke.” Nefuru said evenly. “I’ll take you at your word. Swear to me, Kinka. As is custom in this land, give me the blood proof of your honour and then return to my sister’s side.”

“Yes, Oujisama.” Kinka nodded her head, her grip tightening on the hilt of the blade. Her eyes narrowed, then, with one sweeping gesture she brought the sharp tip of the blade down briskly across her palm, wincing slightly as it cut through her skin. Red blood bubbled from the wound as she held up her hand, meeting the Prince’s gaze with a resolute one of her own.

“With my blood I swear my loyalty to Ouba-hime and the royal house of Sairou, beyond all other loyalties that may sway me.” She said softly. “As blood of the Han-ke, and blood of the Kei-ke, I, Kei Kinka promise to be faithful only to those by whose blade I make this oath.”

“The blood that stains this weapon carries your soul to Byakko and ties you to us through his grace.” Nefuru reclaimed the weapon, taking a cloth from the desk as he wiped the blade clean. “The tradition of Sairou is that once a weapon has cut through someone and touched their life-blood, a little piece of that person remains ingrained in that blade forever. Your soul is therefore bound to this place and this duty for as long as you live, Kei Kinka. Go in safety to my sister’s side. I have faith in you — I know you won’t let us down.”

He held the cloth out to Kinka who took it, wrapping it around her bleeding hand with a rueful grin.

“Thank you, Nefuru-sama.” She said sincerely, bowing her head respectfully towards him. “For giving me the chance to prove I’m not my father’s daughter as much as anything else. It might not be in my power to say it again, but I am truly grateful for your family’s forebearance and mercy in that matter. And I will repay it. Even if you had not asked me to swear by blood, that was my intention and always has been.”

“Yes, I see that in your eyes.” Nefuru acknowledged. “Ouba will wonder where you are, though, and you mustn’t delay the departure.

Sayo has strict instructions as to what route to follow and losing time could add danger to the trip, if you're caught in dangerous territory after dark."

"Yes, Oujisama." Kinka bowed once more, then she withdrew from the chamber, closing the door softly behind her.

Once alone in the hall, however, she let out her breath in a rush, glancing down at her bloody hand.

"Like Rouhei-sama said, my job is to defend the Princess and I will. From everything." She reflected. "No matter what Byakko has in store for any of us, that is my duty and I'll stick to it. She's counting on me, after all. They all are, but her most of all. And I won't let her down. Ouba-hime is more important to me than anything else, now — I won't let her down!"

"It seems there's another storm in the offing."

Kintsusei, Emperor of Kutou sighed, casting a grimace out across the palace courtyard as he observed the dark clouds massing on the horizon. "I have to admit there are times that I despise this part of the year. Winter is gone and with it the snow, but there isn't yet the sun to herald summer. Just overcast skies and unrelenting rain… why is it, do you suppose, that Emperors can exert their control over the land but not over the sky?"

"I think trying to command the weather might be overreaching yourself, Heika." From his seat across the chamber, Hyoushin raised his head from the papers spread out before him, amusement flickering in his amethyst eyes as he registered his companion's restless mood. "I believe that you have said that same thing each year since you were crowned Emperor of Kutou, twenty years ago. I was under the impression, however, that Seiryuu was a deity associated with water. Surely that means the rain is his doing — and you should rejoice in it?"

"You never resist a chance to tease me about my faith, do you?" Kintsusei rested his chin in his hands, eying his companion accusingly, and Hyoushin shrugged.

"Not particularly." He said evenly. "But you do sometimes lay yourself open to such remarks, my Lord. Besides, you and I both know from long experience that Kutou's rainfall benefits the crops of the people who work in the fields and bolster our still-recovering economy. And futhermore, that the sun will yet come. It is simply a matter of patience and time… that is all."

“You prefer the wet weather to the hot sun, though.” Kintsusei pointed out, and Hyoushin nodded.

“I won’t deny it.” He admitted. “Though I prefer the snow to both of them. Still, I will simply wait for winter to come again — weather is one of those things which cannot be altered by mere people.”

He looked rueful.

“And at least it is not as hot here in summer as it is south of the border.” He added wryly. “I think Kutou’s climate is fairly pleasant, all things considered.”

He tilted his head on his side, eying his superior pensively.

“If I may say so, Heika, you seem even more unsettled than usual this morning.” He added. “For you to have dismissed your Council already, and for you to have called me here so suddenly — something is preying on your mind, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps.” Kintsusei sighed. “I know that Princess Ouba will probably begin her journey in the next day or two. I don’t know how I’ll feel when she arrives here, Hyoushin — but it seems so very real all of a sudden. All these talks and negotiations and now a young girl is coming from so far away to be my consort. It seems somewhat strange, I suppose. I’m thirty five this year, and I’ve been a soldier and a bachelor King for longer than most Emperors. She must wonder what kind of man she is coming to marry, considering she can’t be much more than eighteen herself.”

“Are you afraid you may disappoint her, my Lord?” Hyoushin asked frankly, and Kintsusei shrugged.

“I have a soldier’s experience of women.” He said simply. “You have lived and worked with soldiers and had charge of many young men over your time with me, so you understand what that means. I wouldn’t say I have ever womanised — certainly I have never raped or pillaged in the manner of some of my father’s men. But I’ve never been in a situation where courtship has come into play. In a country wracked by civil war, such things are neither prudent nor well-timed. And now…”

“And now a foreign Princess has been offered to you, and you feel compelled to accept for Kutou’s sake as well as your own.” Hyoushin murmured. Kintsusei nodded.

“Exactly that.” He agreed. “And unless she has some violent objection to me once she meets me, I have every intention of going through with this and taking it to a formal status of consort. It has so

many potential benefits for this country, and with peace still being consolidated, it is time I thought about the future and who may follow me when I'm too old or feeble to stumble through politics any longer."

He smiled slightly.

"That side of it I don't mind so very much." He acknowledged. "To have a son and heir would be a nice sensation, I think. But the trouble one must go through to get to that point…"

He rubbed his temples.

"I envy you." He said at length. "You are not a Prince, nor a King. You have been able to let your heart choose your wife, and it is a good choice — for both of you. For an Emperor it's not so simple… love doesn't come into that equation. And so I must win over a stranger who will, no doubt, feel lost and bewildered in this land."

"An Imperial Father in Law is also one whom you would not wish to antagonise too greatly by offending his precious daughter." Hyoushin mused thoughtfully. "Myoume believes that Heiboutei-heika is a shrewd leader, and that he has made a wise tactical choice. She is Sairou-born, so I take her opinion on this quite seriously. Also, I am well acquainted with you and your character. Regardless of your family connections, you are your own man and have done much to rehabilitate the opinion of Kutou's royalty held by outside courts as well as by your own people. You should not worry so much. You have a kind disposition and your worrying now is only evidence of it. Ouba-hime will come and you will make an ally of her. Such is my faith in you, Heika."

"And that's precisely why I called you here this morning." Kintsusei admitted ruefully. "My Council are good, and I believe, loyal. But they treat me as a leader and not as a man like them with doubts and worries. Equally, I cannot show those men any doubts and worries I have, because of Kutou's recent unstable history. It is a relief to be able to air my honest opinions to someone, even if you tire of hearing them."

"I do not tire of it, Heika." Hyoushin glanced down at the papers in front of him. "But I am not given to literary means. I have signed the documents you ostensibly called me here to sign, although I will have to trust your account of the contents since much of the kanji is beyond my understanding. I am afraid that, my sword aside, I am of little other use to you at court."

"Your advice is sound, regardless of your shaky literacy." Kintsusei came across to look over his shoulder, a smile touching his lips as he

made out his companion's familiar, scrawling signature. "At least you are able to write the name I gave you, which is more than some soldiers when they enter barracks and begin training."

"Indeed." Humour touched Hyoushin's gaze. "Although if it would please your Highness, I could equally sign my true name Lilaihi in proper Meihi script."

"I think my Council may balk at that." Kintsusei grinned. "Even though peaceful overtures have been made to any Meihi exiles who wish to return, and provision made for those till recently bonded in slavery, I don't think Kutou's court is quite ready for your people's language or written word, Hyoushin. You might find kanji difficult but I find the Meihi way of writing completely impossible to fathom."

"Ah well." Hyoushin reflected. "I suppose there is time yet. And I imagine that it would not be appropriate anyhow, to write political documents in sprawling Meihi script."

"As for your kanji, I thought Myoume was trying to help you improve in that regard? You've been married a year — she must be a shocking teacher, if you've not made any progress at all."

"It's more a case of my being a hopeless student." Hyoushin raised honest amethyst eyes to his companion's dark ones. "Myoume is far keener to learn Meihi than I am to practice kanji. For that matter my sister's Chinese is coming on in leaps and bounds and it may even reach the point where she surpasses me in terms of how many characters she knows. I am not naturally linguistic, Heika. I learnt to speak Kutou's dialect by necessity, but I am not gifted in that regard. My stupidity is ingrained into me, I'm afraid — I doubt you will teach this old dog too many more tricks."

Despite himself, Kintsusei laughed, bringing his hand down warmly on his friend's shoulder.

"Old dog or not, I value your being here." He assured the Meihi. "More so since I realised what court would be like without you. A lot has happened since the war ended, and even more during the climax and the coming of the Miko. It really is true when they say divine maidens change everyone they meet in some way or another."

"Indeed." Hyoushin became pensive. "My faith may not be as yours is, Heika, but I am capable of believing in the strength of people. Hikari's appearance was initially deceptive — but we all have much to be thankful to her for."

He smiled, brushing his left arm absently with the fingers of his

other hand.

“Maybe it can also be said that I have Miramu to thank.” He added. “For it was his assault on me that brought me into such close proximity to his sister and now I would not be without her. It is funny how things work out, but I think there are things to be learnt from such a contrary situation.”

“Meaning?” Kintsusei looked startled. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear you speak of Miramu in that way.”

“Miramu died so that Myoume could live and find her ‘man of peace’.” Hyoushin said composedly. “He assaulted me but did not kill me, and it was Myoume who nursed me most through my fever and ill health that followed. Miramu did not know I was the man from Myoume’s visions, yet it was him who brought us together even despite his hatred for me. Sometimes such things exist — catalysts — to bring other matters into play. And I believe Ouba-hime’s coming here will prove another such circumstance. She is not just a pretty trinket being sent from a foreign court. She is the first overture of a potentially long and solid political alliance with Sairou that will benefit both lands. She is also one who can give you something you badly need — an heir to this land to keep Kutou in peace when you are no longer here. Whether you fear it or look to it with eager anticipation, I believe Ouba-hime’s coming will make changes for the better.”

He smiled.

“And I hope very much that you will like her too, Heika. I would like it if you could find happiness like I have — after all, I feel you more than deserve it.”

“I suppose time will tell on all counts.” Kintsusei rubbed his chin. “I hadn’t thought about Miramu in that context, but your reason is typical of you and makes perfect sense. I hope that you’re right about the Princess, though your rationale has put my mind somewhat more at rest. I suppose I worry most about either offending or frightening her. I will not be my Father — but she must know all about him and his deeds.”

“I’m sure she — and Heiboutei-heika — both do.” Hyoushin nodded. “But Heiboutei-heika’s agents have been very active here in the lead up to all this. He will know you are not like your father. If he did not know that, he would not have sent his precious daughter into your care, would he?”

“Probably not, but even so…”

“Do you truly want my opinion, Heika?” Hyoushin asked softly, and Kintsusei nodded.

“Yes, if you have one to offer.” He agreed.

“Your greatest strength is your kindness.” Hyoushin eyed his friend levelly. “You are a King in need of a wife and an heir, and Ouba-hime must give you that if she is to fulful her reason for coming to Kutou. She knows it and so do you, but I am sure she will look on that at present with… shall we say, hesitation? As you are, she is probably uncertain of meeting a stranger and then having to commit to him so closely.”

“So your advice is to win her over rather than use Imperial will?” Kintsusei murmured, and Hyoushin nodded.

“You are a man, as you said yourself. Ouba-hime is a young woman as well as a Princess.” He agreed. “You have the power to make her like you — even if you do not feel you will create love from this match. If you can win her respect and her friendship, and let her have her own time to adjust to the changes in her situation, I think you will find everything runs a lot more smoothly. It is, after all, a wrench to come to a new place and learn new customs. I know this better than anyone, I dare say — Ouba-hime’s jump is maybe not as great as mine was, culturally speaking. But I have been to Sairou and spent time in various towns on your errand as well as a longer spell in Myoume’s village. The customs of that country are not the customs of this one, even if the dialect is largely the same. She will need more time than you to adjust to the idea of marriage. This is not her world, after all. She has no family here, and will need to find allies among strangers before she can walk with confidence through the halls. If you are willing to give her that time, I think you will very likely win her trust.”

“My council are more eager than I am to rush into things.” Kintsusei nodded. “Your advice confirms my own feelings on the matter. And, of course, given your own experience, I’m glad of your counsel.”

He smiled.

“Ouba-hime may be comforted to know that a fellow Sairou-jin is already installed at court.” He added. “Will you mind very much if I utilise your wife as a potential ‘ally’ for the Princess to find when she arrives here?”

“Myoume’s said herself that she’s curious to meet the girl, so I don’t think I can brook any objection.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I would

only ask that you remember she has other concerns on her mind at present than Kutou's politics — and although I am no longer as apprehensive about her health as I was, I am still anxious to see my first child born in safety."

"Of course. I want that too." Kintsusei assured him. "I won't forget, Hyoushin. You have my word."

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

“Arina! Ari-chan, you space-cadet, are you not receiving messages from planet Earth any longer?”

As Arina made her way towards the school gate she heard someone calling her name and she paused, turning to register the impatient Chieki waving at her from across the grass. She frowned, hesitating as her classmate ran towards her, thick curls of hair bouncing in the wind.

“Ari-chan, you were sneaking out on your own again.” Chieki’s tones were reproachful. “You didn’t eat lunch with us and now you don’t want to walk home? What’s eating you lately? You’ve barely said a word since we spoke at lunch and I swear you’ve spent most of today staring at the ceiling. So much for studying — you weren’t with the program at all in English class last period.”

“I know. Maybe I’m coming down with something.” Arina rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry, Chichi. I totally forgot that I’d agreed to walk back with you tonight, seeing as I’m not working. My days are all blurred in my head — I didn’t realise.”

“You do look a bit pale.” Chieki’s irritation faded as she linked her arm in her companion’s, brushing her free hand against her friend’s brow as she led her purposefully out of the school grounds and onto the main street where many other students from the Yotsubaidai High School were milling around in groups. “You don’t have a fever, though. Maybe skipping lunch was a bad idea, huh? Perhaps you’re working too hard.”

She grinned.

“After all, if you’re not used to it, your brain’s likely not to be able to take it after a while.” She teased. “How about we forget about study for an hour or two this evening and go into the city? There’s a new film playing at the multiplex in Shibuya and you haven’t been out with anyone for ages.”

“You make it sound like a date.” Despite herself, Arina grinned. “I’m sorry, Chi-chan, but I’m not that way inclined.”

“Silly.” Chieki scolded, punching her friend playfully on the arm.

“Can’t you tell when someone’s worried about you?”

She eyed her companion thoughtfully.

“Come to think of it, when was the last time you *did* have a date?” She realised. “You’ve not been out with anyone for a long time. Kyouko said that you used to be the life and soul of the party in middle school — you were always chatting up this guy or that or going to parties or whatever. Even when we began High School, you still seemed to do it a little. But I don’t know — in the last six months you’ve got all weird, somehow. It’s worrying.”

“What has Kyouko been saying about me?” Arina looked startled. “Sure, I guess in Middle School there were some guys I went out with casually from time to time. But there weren’t that many — she’s exaggerating. And sure, I went to parties and stuff — doesn’t everyone? But I’m serious about sorting my grades and graduating, you know. I hate being dependant on Dad’s money for anything, these days. He’s such a jerk, and he couldn’t care less if I’m home or I’m not. So I want to show him I can do something without his help.”

“Yeah, I get all of that.” Chieki acknowledged. “You know, we’ve been friends since we began High School and I’ve been to your place a ton of times, but I still haven’t met your Dad. I only saw your Mum once, in passing. They’re away a lot and I get that it bugs you. But even so, it isn’t just about school stuff. You’re doing okay in classes, but its not like you’re topping them every test or anything. It’s not that which you’re spending all the time reading or studying into, is it? It’s this ancient Chinese astrology stuff that’s eating away at you.”

“I wouldn’t say eating away.” Arina shook her head, fishing into her bag for her cigarettes and her lighter. “It’s an interest, that’s all. It’s not that strange.”

She paused, leaning up against the high brick wall as she lit her cigarette, offering the pack to her friend, who shook her head impatiently.

“You know I don’t like it, Ari-chan. I don’t know why you still insist on doing it. It doesn’t fit with your new library assistant study-bug persona at all.”

“Huh?” Arina stared, flicking ash from the cigarette as she eyed her friend quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“Look.” Chieki sighed, shaking her head. “I wasn’t with you at Middle School so I don’t know all the stuff that went on there. But I’ve heard things from Kyouko and other kids about the way you used to

lead the rebel half of the year by the nose, pretty much. And this Hikari kid you were so close to, well, according to Kyouko she was a nice kid but she depended on you more than you did on her. And then she transferred — and you changed pretty much overnight. You stopped hanging out late in the city, you stopped sneaking around under your parents' radar. You started studying and passed your High School entrance exams. Yet nothing I've heard about this Hikari kid suggests she was a bad influence on you back then. So I don't get it. You're not the way Kyouko describes you, when she talks about you in Middle School. And it worries me that something happened… something you don't want to talk about."

"Like what?" Arina frowned. "I don't know where you're coming from, Chieki. Hikari was my best friend. She still is. Wherever she is, that doesn't change. Even if I can't see her any more. She told me so and I believe it. And as for my grades, I guess I just grew up and realised how important they were, that's all. The two things aren't necessarily connected. Like you said, you didn't know Hi-chan. So you really can't judge. And Kyouko shouldn't be gossiping about things she doesn't understand."

"You're getting edgy again." Chieki's eyes narrowed. "When Hikari's name comes up, you always get like this. Evasive and jumpy and defensive, like you're trying to keep some big secret and its taking its toll. That's what I'm talking about, Ari-chan. If something's worrying you, I want you to talk about it. I don't know Hikari, so I'm on your side. If anything happened between the two of you before she left…"

"All that happened was that she and I said goodbye, and she left with Sukunami-san's old friend Ri-san." Arina said firmly.

"But why? All of a sudden, why did she leave with Sukunami-san's friend?" Chieki demanded. "This is what doesn't make any sense. Your best friend upped and left in the middle of her last year at middle school, right before exams. Before, I'm sure you said she'd gone to the South of Japan. Today you said it was China. And you've tensed right up, I can see it. You don't like discussing it. So whatever it was, there's more to it than just her transferring. I'm sure of it. Something else happened — and you're not allowed to talk about it."

"Something like what?" Arina took a drag on her cigarette, glaring at her companion defiantly. "You sound crazy and paranoid, Chieki. What could have happened?"

"Who knows?" Chieki shrugged helplessly. "But its bothering Kyouko, it's bothering me — and I'm sure other people have noticed

how odd it is. You two were apparently inseparable in Middle School. Then Hikari disappeared… and I mean that literally. Noone's seen or heard from her in over a year. Don't you think that's suspicious? She had other friends at school, none of which know a thing about where she is or what kind of people she's gone to live with. Does she even correspond with Sukunami-san and his wife? My Mum works with Sukunami Taka-san, you know that. She's said he acts strange sometimes, when he's talking about his daughter. Actually, she asked me if the girl had died, because the way he acts its like he's remembering someone he's never going to see again. And that sort of creeped me out, if you want to know the truth. I started to really think about it… what if that is what happened? What if this Hikari didn't go away at all. What if she died?"

Arina's eyes widened with disbelief, the cigarette slipping forgotten from her fingers as she stared at her companion in bewilderment.

"Well?" Chieki demanded. "Is that it? Is that what you've been not talking about for the past year and a half… or more? Is Hikari really transferred, or did she die and noone wants to talk about the truth?"

"Damn it, Chieki, your imagination's frigging lurid sometimes!" At last Arina found her voice, shaking her head impatiently. "Of course Hi-chan isn't dead! You realise what you're suggesting is that someone murdered her, and I know about it, but I've covered it up for some reason — or that somehow *I* killed her, is that what you think? For God's sake, stop watching those godawful horror movies and see some sense. *Hikari is not dead.* All right? I'll swear it to you in blood, if you like. What I told you is true. She left with Sukunami-san's friend Ri-san and went to live with him and his family on their… I think it was some kind of herb farm, but I don't remember all the details. And damn right I'm edgy about the subject — because I miss her! I miss her a lot, okay? There are a lot of things you don't understand and even more you wouldn't believe even if I did tell you. But noone's killed Hikari. She's still alive. She's just not here. All right?"

"Shit, calm down!" Chieki held up her hands. "It was just a question. It bugged me, that's all."

"Well, get a reality check." Arina said scornfully. "Do you really think I'd sit on it, if something bad had happened to Hi-chan? Like hell I would. And do you think I'd spend time with her family if I thought any of them had hurt her? They love her — I guess I was jealous of that, because she has such a good family and mine are completely the opposite. The Sukunamis have been good to me since she left — hell, they've always been good to me, if I'm honest about it.

So I've kept in contact with them even since she went away. But I wouldn't keep my mouth shut for anyone, if Hikari'd been hurt."

"All right, all right. I believe you." Chieki sighed. "But it still seems strange. She did leave in the middle of her final middle school year, after all."

"It was what Hikari decided to do." Arina said slowly. "It was her choice, and her family let her. That's all. It was something important to her."

"To go and live in a rural village somewhere in the wilds of China?"

"Something like that."

"I really don't get it, you know."

"No, sometimes nor do I." Arina admitted. "But I respect it. And her for feeling strong enough to do it."

"See, that makes no sense either." Chieki put her hands on her hips. "You're being weird again. You're my friend, Ari-chan, but sometimes I wish you'd remember that. And talk to me. Talk to any of us. We're not just here to have a good time, you know. If something's on your mind…"

"You'd never believe me, even if I tried." Arina said matter-of-factly. "So what's the point?"

"You could try me."

"No." Arina shook her head. "It's not like that. It's complicated. And not to be rude, but it's also none of your business."

"Charming!" Chieki looked hurt, and Arina sighed.

"I didn't mean it how it sounded." She said tiredly. "Look, I'm sorry, Chi-chan. I'm tired and I'm not thinking straight right now. I think I should just head back home and take a nap. Maybe it was skipping lunch, but I'm a little light-headed and I don't want to fight with you. If we carry this conversation on I'm just going to say something we'll both regret."

"I still think it'd do you good to get your head out of the books and to step into the fresh air." Chieki objected, and Arina shrugged.

"Well, the cinema is hardly that." She said sensibly. "And I *am* tired. I'd not be following the plot."

"Fine, you win." Chieki sighed, shrugging in defeat. "So I'll walk you to the door, at least, so you don't pass out on the street or

something. You really do look pale, though."

She frowned.

"How about this weekend? Are you working?"

"No, I'm not." Arina shook her head. "The library's closing for some renovations on Friday, and they don't need me till next Wednesday night."

"Then this weekend, how about we all go somewhere? You, me, Kyouko — shopping, or to see a film, or something?" Chieki suggested. "We don't do things together much these days, and it'd do you good."

Arina bit her lip, and Chieki sent her a quizzical look.

"Well? What's the problem now?" She demanded, and Arina sighed.

"Sunday." She said frankly. "Sunday, I'll come shopping with you guys. All right?"

"All right, but what's wrong with Saturday?" Chieki looked blank, and Arina pursed her lips, her mind on the diary that lay in the bottom of her rucksack.

"I think I'm going to go to Morioka." She said softly. "Someone I recently started reading about about is buried there, and it's time I went to pay my respects."

"You're going to a cemetery?" Chieki's eyes almost fell out of her head, and Arina nodded.

"Shit, isn't it bad enough doing that when its a family member?" Chieki demanded. "You're going to go find the grave of someone you found in a book?"

"Something like that." Arina agreed, as images of her earlier dream flashed through her senses. Had it truly been a dream, she wondered absently. Or had it really been the dead spirit of Byakko no Miko reaching through the pages of her book to touch her thoughts?

"Is it a famous person? Something like that?"

"No… just someone interesting." Arina flashed her friend a grin. "But it's all right. I won't forget. Sunday afternoon we'll go into the city, I promise. All right?"

"Well, I guess that's better than nothing." Chieki relented. "All right. I'll tell Kyouko. But really, Ari, you need to look at your hobbies. Reading dusty old books is bad enough, but visiting

strangers' graves…"

"Maybe." Arina acknowledged. "But either way, I think it will be interesting to go. Maybe I'll find out something more that I don't know already."

"Whatever you say." Chieki offered her a rueful grin. "This is your stop, Arina-chan. Get a good night's sleep, huh? And I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right." Arina returned the grin with a sheepish one of her own. "Thanks, Chieki. And I'm sorry I'm so spaced out. I guess it's the time of the month or something."

"Guess so." Chieki acknowledged. "All right. Hopefully by tomorrow you'll be back in the world of the living."

She raised her hand in a wave, hurrying off down the main street and Arina sighed, turning to gaze up at her family home with a look of resignation in her dark eyes. Her father's car was still absent, she noted as she fumbled in her pocket for the door key, and her mother wasn't due home for another couple of days.

"I might as well live on my own." She muttered, thrusting the metal into the lock with a little more force than was necessary as she let herself into the darkened house. "Shit, Hi-chan goes to another world and people notice she's missing. Her family are still trying to come to terms with the fact she isn't coming back. So am I, if you come to it. Folk ask questions. People who don't even know her, like Chieki, want a piece of whatever's going on."

She dropped her bag down against the wall, unzipping it and pulling out Suzuno's diary.

"If I disappeared, Chieki and Kyouko might notice." She reflected. "I guess Sukunami-san and Miaka-san might, too. Keisuke-san, even — especially since I still have books that belong to him. Which reminds me, I didn't get a chance to ask him yet about the star-chart I found in the notebook. I should tell him about what happened in school, too. At least…"

She frowned, then shook her head, hugging the diary more tightly to her chest.

"It might have been a dream." She realised. "I am tired, and I have been putting a lot of effort into this researching of late. With the job at the library too, I guess I might have imagined it, or fallen asleep. Perhaps I'd better not bother him with it just at the moment."

She headed through into the kitchen, setting the book down on the counter and pulling open the fridge as she scanned the ready-meals for something easy to cook. It wasn't that she was particularly hungry, she reasoned to herself as she grabbed the nearest one and pulled off the wrapping, shoving it in the microwave and turning the dial. But after her experience in the library that lunchtime, she knew it was better to be on the safe side.

"It might have been because I skipped a meal and I don't usually." She reasoned. "So I'll be cautious. Although…"

She glanced across at the diary, then shook her head, pulling open the cupboard door as she hunted for a plate onto which to dump her hastily cooked meal.

"I can read later." She told herself. "As it stands, it's not as though I've read anything much, yet. Just the introduction page — and that had nothing much on it. But I don't want to spill food on it. Keisuke-san wouldn't be impressed, if I did that."

She sighed, yanking open the microwave and tipping the contents of the tray out onto her plate.

"Maybe I really *will* go to Morioka on Saturday." She reflected inwardly. "I said it on a whim, but maybe it's not such a bad idea. Suzuno-san *is* buried there — Keisuke-san said as much. And it wouldn't be that weird — would it? I mean, I was — I mean, I *am* best friends with a real life Miko from this ShijinTenchishou thing. Hikari was Seiryuu no Miko, I know that. Miaka-san is — was Suzaku no Miko. Suzuno-san was Byakko no Miko and the other one, Takiko-san, she was buried in Morioka as well, I think. So it's like a study pilgrimage. There might even be things in the library there that aren't here in the capital. Local things. Newspapers. I don't know — something. Just something real… about Oosugi Suzuno and what kind of person she was."

She smiled ruefully.

"I really am becoming a geek." She mused resignedly. "This is your fault, Hi-chan! If you could see me right now, you'd either freak out or laugh out loud. But since you went to that place, everything's been different. I don't like it being out of my control, dammit! Even if Keisuke-san says it's hopeless… somehow I'm going to find a way to get you to come back!"

Almost as soon as the words had left her mouth, Arina was aware of a sudden flash of white light, and she started, almost dropping her plate on the floor as she glanced around her, searching for the source.

At first she saw nothing, then out of the corner of her eye she was aware of a faint, opal haze shimmering at the edges of Suzuno's diary. She cursed, setting the plate down carefully on the table as she took a hesitant step or two in the direction of the old notebook. As she drew nearer, however, she was aware of the late afternoon sun glittering in through the window, and she sighed, her hand going to her chest as she struggled to calm down. So it had been a trick of sunlight, after all. Just the glint of a passing car or van whose mirrors had momentarily caught the sun, sending the glare ricocheting back into the Kobayashi's kitchen.

"I'm jumpy." She scolded herself, reaching over to pick up the book. "Keisuke-san already told me this wasn't a magic book. It's just Suzuno's diary. I don't know why I'm being so weird about it… it's just an old notebook."

She flipped it open, glancing at the introductory page for a moment as she re-read Suzuno's words and the two distinctive characters scrawled underneath. Then she took a deep breath, turning the page over.

Once again she found herself faced with blank sheets and she frowned, lifting it up to the light as she squinted at it carefully.

"I don't get this." She muttered. "What the…?"

She brushed her finger against the paper, and almost as soon as she did so, a sense of warmth flooded through her. As the haze became stifling, she let out a gasp, dropping down onto the kitchen floor as the book went skimming across the tiles. She took a deep breath, trying to compose herself, but it was too late. From somewhere deep within her consciousness she was sure she could hear voices, and as the kitchen around her blurred and faded out of recognition, she was almost sure she could feel the brush of a harsh desert wind against her skin.

"Are you sure that it's all right for me to be here?"

Suzuno gazed up at the immense sandstone building, a mixture of awe and trepidation on her young features. From behind her, Tokaki let out a sigh, shaking his head as he clamped a reassuring hand down on her shoulder.

"Listen to me, kid… you're Byakko no Miko, right? So why are you worried about entering a temple? You're practically the Tiger's messenger — I don't get it. Don't you have temples in your world? You're acting like a scared sheep."

"The temples in my world aren't like this." Suzuno bristled, despite herself, and she pulled away from Tokaki's touch, turning to glare at him. "And will you stop touching me? I never said you could — you know, you're way too familiar with me considering we've just met. I'm grateful for you saving my life, but I never said that I was Byakko no Miko or anything like that. I don't know how I got here and I'd like to find a way to get home — instead you've brought me out here to some strange place and I don't understand why."

Tokaki folded his arms, leaning back against the dusty sandstone wall as he eyed her thoughtfully.

"You do complain a lot." He reflected. "Last night you were cold. This morning you didn't like the dry dustiness of the air. Then you complained about being teleported across the landscape — although you wouldn't have walked it so easy as that inside of three days by the looks of you. And now you're complaining about something else. Suzuno-chan, you really ought to stop and take a breath sometimes. Whether you like it or not, you're here. You might as well try and make it a bit easier on me, huh? I've never played host or guardian to a Miko before."

At this, Suzuno frowned, biting back the retort that burned on her lips as she registered the genuine irritation in her companion's vivid amber eyes. He was a stranger still, she acknowledged to herself, and one who had done his fair share of annoying her since they had met the previous afternoon. But even so, she did not want to be left alone in this odd place and she had the sudden feeling that, Miko or no Miko, if she pushed him too much harder he might well leave her to her own devices.

She sighed, toying idly with one of her long thick braids as she contemplated the situation.

*"Do you **really** think that I'm this Byakko no Miko person?" She asked softly. "I mean, truly and honestly? Because I… I don't want to be anything like that. And I didn't ask to come here. Seriously, it's frightening. Takiko-neechan came here and she wound up dying because of it. That Genbu thing did something horrible to her and she couldn't get better. I don't want to end up like her. So I'd like to go home. I'm not brave enough to be any kind of Miko — and besides, my Papa will be worrying about me."*

"Your Papa thinks a lot of you, huh?" Tokaki raised an eyebrow, and Suzuno nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "But especially since Takiko-neechan died. He was worried, you see. He didn't want something like this to happen to me."

"I guess he lucked out then, somewhere along the line." Tokaki glanced

briefly up at the cloudless, brassy sky, then, "Listen. This is new to me too, you know. I don't know much about this Takiko-neechan of yours or if she even was the Miko of Genbu that I've heard rumours about. But one thing I'd stake my life on is that you're Byakko's Priestess. I told you yesterday — when your tears touched my mark, it scalded through me like you'd set fire to my blood or something. I've never felt like it before… it's impossible for me to ignore it."

He sighed heavily, glancing at his hands.

"Most girls I meet aren't as much trouble as you've been so far." He added. "Mind you you're the first girl to stay the night in my house, too. Still, it's all new territory for me. I've always had this mark, but I've never had to do anything about it. Now, suddenly, you've been dropped into my lap. Almost literally, in fact. And I have no idea what to do with you, if you want to know the truth."

He paused, eying her for a moment, and Suzuno's eyes narrowed as she interpreted the mischief in his golden eyes.

"Well, I can think of a couple of things." He amended. "But in terms of Byakko's work they're all a bit of a no-no, so this was the only thing I could think of."

He pursed his lips.

"I guess if I was thrown into your world I'd be a bit freaked out too, although I'm a little insulted that you've completely ignored the potential of being alone in a cosy little hut with your dashing saviour." He added. "But the truth is I don't know how to send you back home, even if I wanted to do it. And to be even more honest, if you're Byakko's Miko, like hell can I ***let*** *you go back home. If you're here, and you're* ***her****, that means shit is going down somewhere in this country. And if that's happening, I can't let you go anywhere. People's lives might depend on it — or at least, that's how I think this whole thing works."*

Suzuno stared at him, her initial horror at his coarse language overridden by the final part of his remark.

"People's lives?" She whispered. "On ***me****?"*

"That's how the legend goes." Tokaki agreed. "So that's why we've come to this place. Because I might not know much, but I know a guy who probably does."

"I see." Suzuno chewed down hard on her lip. "And that's why we've come to see this friend of yours, Ranva-san? This… Kasaru person?"

"You shouldn't call me Ranva, if you're Byakko's Miko." Tokaki

corrected her, and Suzuno grimaced.

"You call me Suzuno." She said frankly. "And I don't want you to start calling me 'Miko'. Tokaki doesn't mean anything to me. So it's a star — well, you're not a star. You're a person. So why should I call you some silly stellar name when its not who you are at all? So you have kanji on your cheek sometimes — that doesn't mean you're not a human being, right?"

"You really are a weird kid, you know that?" Despite himself, Tokaki laughed. "But it's all right. Call me Tokaki. At least if you do I'll remember that I'm supposed to be protecting you, and not chatting you up. Although, even with all your complaining, it's sort of a waste."

He shrugged.

"You are quite pretty, you know." he added. "I guess that's what coming from another world does for you."

Suzuno eyed him warily, and Tokaki grinned.

"If you want me to call you Suzuno still, then I will." He assured her. "But I feel like I'm 'on duty', as it were. So Tokaki seems more appropriate somehow."

"If you're on-duty, does that mean you're going to stop making lewd remarks?" Suzuno asked suspiciously, and Tokaki looked rueful.

"And I thought I'd been remarkably forbearing, considering the temptation." He bantered. "But we're wasting time. At this time of the year, dust-storms can kick up out of nowhere. So lets go inside, huh? Stick close to me, and you won't get lost. Or groped."

"By sticking close to you?" Suzuno looked doubtful, and Tokaki put his hands on his hips.

"Hey, give me some credit!" He protested. "Words aren't the same as loose fingers, right? This place has some depraved monkish types living under its roof… stop looking at me like that and take note, all right? I'm thinking of your safety — and for Byakko's benefit, too."

"What about this Kasaru-san?" Suzuno asked, as Tokaki pushed back the heavy wood-panelled door, gesturing for her to follow him inside. She did so, finding herself in a long, narrow hallway and despite herself she shivered, glancing around her at the many identical doors they passed along the way. As they went deeper and deeper into the building, however, the passage branched off into two, and Tokaki grabbed her by the arm, pulling her to the left as they entered a larger domed chamber, high-arched windows around the top admitting light into the otherwise shut-away space. Suzuno paused for a moment, glancing up at the soft-stone ceiling as she

did so and she let out a little gasp, her eyes widening as she made out the delicate form of a white tiger standing erect and alert over the mountain land.

"Byakko." Tokaki told her, giving her arm a squeeze. "From the Kanin mountains. They're blessed, after all — loads of people do pictures of Byakko in that setting. It's pretty mundane really — come on. There's no time to dither here. We haven't come to sight-see, after all. And Kasaru-kun's chamber is further along."

"You still haven't told me about what sort of a person he is." Suzuno objected, nonetheless allowing herself to be dragged from the room into another long and narrow hall. "Is he that bad that you think it's going to scare me? Or…?"

"No, not at all." Tokaki laughed. "Kasaru's more likely to be frightened by you than the other way around. He keeps himself to himself, quite a lot. But he's a good man. And a useful one to know in times of drought or crop failure."

"So is he a priest?"

"No…" Tokaki hesitated, then he shook his head. "No. He's not a priest. But he does spend a lot of time in the temple and its surrounding area. So much so that he has lodgings here — and I think he's here more than he is anywhere else these days. I suppose you might call him a hermit, although he's a hermit who does go out and about from time to time, so… ah, I guess you'll see what I mean soon enough."

"If he's a hermit, how do you know him, Ra… Tokaki-san?" Suzuno asked, confused.

"Well, like I said, sometimes he travels out and about." Tokaki flashed her a grin. "He's sort of famous in these parts, actually. You'll see why soon enough. Sairou's a desert land, after all — it'll all make sense to you, when you come to meet him."

At that point they reached a large stone door and Tokaki put his hand against it, pausing for a moment, then gently knocking his hand against it. The touch was very slight, but the hollow nature of the stone meant the sound echoed around the whole chamber, and Suzuno was sure she heard a soft, even voice speak from behind the divide.

"Come in."

"Here we go. Remember your manners." Tokaki told Suzuno playfully, ignoring the indignation in her gaze as he pushed against the smooth cool surface, and Suzuno found her retort dying on her lips as she caught sight for the first time of the chamber within.

Chamber was the wrong word, in fact, she realised, as she gazed around her in awe and surprise. Where the other areas of the temple had been clearly built from stone and desert sand, this room was covered from wall to wall by various forms of greenery, and at first the bewildered young girl thought that the walls themselves had been constructed from the plethera of wild plants and trees that seemed to grow there. As she took a hesitant step forward, however, she realised that it was simply an illusion — that the spreading greenery had simply cloaked the barren nature of the cell's usual stone walls.

The floor felt soft beneath her feet and she glanced down, expecting to see some kind of rug or even sand, but instead she found the glittering emerald of grass, interspersed at the edges with various ferns and blossoms that she had never seen before. Climbers and trailers wound their leaves and vines together into what was almost a living curtain, and in the midst of the green were the odd splashes of colour — reds and yellows and whites as flower after flower lifted its head up towards the sun.

"Paradise." She murmured, hearing Tokaki chuckle behind her as he registered her reaction.

"It's nice, isn't it?" He said off-handedly. "I told you that coming here would be something else… you approve, then?"

"It's beautiful." Suzuno breathed, and Tokaki nodded.

"It's more than that." He responded. "Kasaru! Come show yourself. Suzuno's suitably impressed by your handiwork — at least come and take credit for it in person!"

"Suzuno?" A voice came from the leafy shadows and Suzuno turned, seeing for the first time the room's inhabitant. Despite herself she felt embarrassed, pink flushing her cheeks as her dark eyes met his violet ones for the first time.

He was surprisingly young, she realised absently, with the same olive complexion that Tokaki had, but instead of the snow white spikes of hair, his was dark and fell in a long straight sheet over his shoulders and down his back. He was dressed in the simple robes of a peasant, yet somehow Suzuno knew that he was nothing so unremarkable, for something in both his bearing and poise gave the unconscious air of someone born of both breeding and means. She bit her lip, unable to find words as he came towards her, eying her keenly.

"Ranva, who is this girl?" He asked softly, his words soft and sweet as he looked to his friend for an explanation. Whilst Tokaki's western accent held a rough edge, somehow this newcomer's words were both musical and low, conveying a gentleness of nature, and for the first time since she had

arrived in Sairou, Suzuno felt somewhat comforted despite her predicament.

"Byakko no Miko." Tokaki said frankly, and the stranger's eyes widened, disbelief glittering in the pensive violet gaze.

"Byakko no…" He murmured, turning his attention back to Suzuno as he regarded her with new eyes. "Is this true? Are you truly the Priestess come to save Sairou from its enemies?"

"I… I don't know." Suzuno admitted, inwardly cursing her lack of composure as she struggled to gather her wits. "I mean, Tokaki-san said that I… and then I… but…"

"Suddenly she's lost for words." Tokaki chuckled. "I know she looks like just another pretty girl, Kasaru, but even so that's what she is. I'm sure of it — sure enough I'd stake my life on it. Byakko's calling on us at long last — and since I don't know much about what that means, I brought her here to talk to you. You put things so much more clearly than I do, and I seem to have rankled her a few times since she was dropped on me yesterday."

"I see." Kasaru still looked doubtful, and Suzuno found she could not blame him for his hesitation. "Well, then I will do my best. But, Ranva, if she is truly Byakko no Miko, you do understand…?"

"Well, it means you'll have to leave this place and show your face a bit more often." Tokaki said briskly. "And yes, I know enough to know it means that there is a danger or an enemy which must be lurking somewhere in the shadows. But we can't run away from it. This is destiny, isn't that how you put it? Besides, you know more than I do about the Genbu legend in Hokkan. You know what this might mean for us and our people, if we really can raise the Tiger and protect this land."

"Yes, I understand." A faint shadow crossed Kasaru's features, and Suzuno thought she saw a flicker of sadness in the stranger's expression. It was soon gone, however, and he turned, bowing his head towards her.

"You must be confused, Miko-sama." He said gently. "And Ranva can be bewildering when he wants to be. Your coming to this world has been long anticipated by our people… you are therefore most welcome in all parts of Sairou."

"Please… don't call me that." Suzuno reddened. "Miko, I mean. Ran..Tokaki-san is convinced it's what I am, but I don't… I don't like how it sounds. Genbu no Miko was someone I knew, and she died because of it. I don't want to die — I don't want to be in that position. I'm sorry if it sounds cowardly but I don't know anything about saving worlds or fighting battles. And…"

“Nor do we, if it comes to that.” Tokaki said evenly. “At least, not on this scale. But it’s sort of how things are, kid. You have no more choice in the matter than either Kasaru and I do. It’s how it is. The sooner you accept it, the sooner we can get on with whatever it is we have to do.”

“Ranva is right.” Kasaru nodded his head. “All the legends suggest the Miko will return to her world on completion of the legend. I don’t know the fate of Genbu no Miko after she left this world, but I do know she and her people brought peace and prosperity to the North country. Please, reconsider. Sairou must be in peril if you have crossed the divide to meet us. If that is the case, without your help, many people will suffer.”

“But I…”

Kasaru dropped to his knees before her, holding out his hands, and Suzuno gasped, staring at him in stricken surprise as he raised earnest violet eyes to hers.

“Those chosen by Byakko as Seishi are here to protect you from danger.” He said solemnly. “So long as there is breath in our bodies, we will not let harm befall you. We need to have faith in you, Miko-sama. And in return, please, put your faith in us.”

“Wait a minute!” Suzuno’s eyes widened. “Are you saying… you… have a mark… like Tokaki-san?”

Kasaru smiled, his solemn features lighting up as he nodded his head. Slowly he turned over his hands, and Suzuno’s hand flew to her mouth as she made out the glittering white kanji tattooed on the back of his right fist.

“My name is Tsuonie Kasaru.” He said softly. “But like Ranva I also have another name. This is the mark of Tatara, one of the constellations of Byakko.”

Gently he reached out his right hand to brush her fingers, and as he did so, the white mark glittered and blazed with a bold irridescent light.

“And you are the Priestess we’ve waited for.” He added. “Ranva is right. You are the one we’ve sought. You are Byakko no Miko.”

“I really don’t understand what that means. What I’ve got to do.” Suzuno said haltingly, and Tatara nodded.

“I know. I think that that has yet to be made clear.” He admitted. “But that you are here gives me hope.”

“The way you say that suggests you know more than I do about what this danger is.” Tokaki reflected, and Tatara shook his head.

“No.” He said cautiously. “Not exactly. But there have been some

stories… little bits and pieces I've heard about problems at the Imperial Court and even… well, the word 'treason' was whispered a couple of times between monks who've visited this place in the last few weeks. It has troubled me, Ranva. More than I've liked, in truth."

He smiled, but Suzuno was once more aware of the sadness in his eyes.

"Like stories have come to me through my family's channels." He added. "Such as they are."

"Treason? As in, against the Emperor?" Tokaki let out a low whistle, and Tatara shrugged.

"Time will tell." He said simply. "But for now, I think Suzuno-sama is scared enough. To be brought here and then thrust into the company of strangers…"

He gestured for her to sit down.

"Please, rest a moment and we'll talk." He suggested. "Ranva, you too. I think there's a storm in the offing, and it's not safe to be outside even with your own abilities."

"I wouldn't mind a drink." Tokaki admitted. "All right."

He grinned.

"Though maybe from hereon in you should be calling me Tokaki, you know. And I should be calling you Tatara, since we're both, essentially, working men now — aren't we?"

"I suppose we are." Tatara acknowledged. "All right. If that's how you want it… I don't mind."

"Tatara-san, Tokaki-san said you weren't a priest." Suzuno found her voice at that moment, settling herself obediently down in one of the few benches the room boasted. "And that you were a hermit, but one which travelled. That didn't make much sense to me and then this room — this place full of flowers — I don't understand. From what I've seen so far, Sairou is one big desert. How do you manage to make so many plants grow in such a small place?"

"That's because Byakko blessed me with the ability to make them grow." Tatara said with a smile, his gaze softening as he began talking about the plants he loved. "Since I was a small child, I've always been able to do it. No matter how limited the means, I can always make flowers grow. That's the gift Byakko gave me as his Seishi — and I've used it from time to time over the years."

"It's because of that fact that he and I first met." Tokaki added,

sprawling out casually on the floor as he leant back on his elbows. "Because where my people live is often hit by drought and crop failure. Thanks to Ka… Tatara, noone starved. He managed to salvage our plants and make them thrive using his magic. He's considered a hero around our settlements… and I'm sure its not the only place that's true. Sairou is very dry, and growing crops is often difficult in many areas. There are few rivers and although there are underground sources of water they can be expensive or difficult to access. So people like Tatara are a godsend in a country like this."

"I see." Suzuno gazed at Tatara with new respect. "Then you really are able to do amazing things, Tatara-san."

"I do the things I can do, just like anyone else." Tatara's smile widened. "I was born with this gift, so it would be a shame not to use it when people need my help. That's why I came here. It's on the edge of the desert, which is where the worst affected settlements are. Besides, one day I knew I'd be called by the Miko into Byakko's service proper. So it seemed right to train and control that magic as much as I could so as to be of use when the time came."

"And now I'm here." Suzuno hugged her knees to her chest, and Tatara nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "Just as the legends foretold."

"What about your family? Don't they mind you being on your own like this?" Suzuno asked. "They must be very proud of you."

Tatara frowned, and Suzuno saw the flicker of sadness return to his gaze.

"My parents passed away almost ten years ago." He said softly. "There was a terrible famine in the city where we lived, and three quarters of the population starved. Mother and Father gave all their efforts to keeping my sister and I alive — and so they succumbed as a result. Then, a year later, my grandmother who had taken us both in also succumed to a plague brought by drought. So Keri-neesama and I were left alone."

He sighed.

"I wasn't able to use my power to its full potential, then." He added. "I could make flowers bloom, true enough, but it wasn't until a year after Grandmother's death that I was able to focus my energy into saving crops and bringing people's situations back from the brink of disaster. I wasn't able to save them, so I decided I would try to save as many people as I was able to in repayment."

"I'm sorry." Guilt flooded Suzuno's heart, and Tatara shook his head.

“It’s nothing you should be sorry for.” He said simply. “But my coming here seemed to be a logical choice.”

He shrugged.

“My sister is eight years older than me, and she married when she was sixteen.” He added. “She doesn’t like that I have this power — she thinks that I should have used it to save Mother and Father and she doesn’t understand that I couldn’t do it then. She became my guardian, when there was noone else — but when my power awoke, she found it more and more difficult to be around me. In the end, she sent me here — she said that with my tie to Byakko, I should learn the religious way of life rather than the life of Sairou’s court. So I came here, and that was that. Now I’m almost twenty summers, I’m old enough to make my own judgments, so there is even less need for contact between us and she no longer provides for me in any way. We don’t often see one another, or speak in any depth. Sometimes I have letters from her — but more often than not I don’t. So you see, Suzuno-sama, this place has become my home and the people here my family. And the temple is truly where I’ve come to belong.”

“That’s so sad.” Suzuno murmured, and Tatara smiled.

“Yes, perhaps it is.” He agreed. “But it’s still how things are, and I accept them. Life is hard, sometimes. That’s just the way it goes. Besides, I’m not the only one who’s lost people because of Sairou’s harsh climate over the years.”

He gestured to Tokaki.

“Ranva… I mean Tokaki has also lost family because of drought and disease.” He reflected. “I think there are few people in Sairou who can claim otherwise.”

“Tokaki?” Suzuno stared, and Tokaki nodded.

“My father and my brother.” He said simply. “When I was just a boy of three. Mother left me with a friend in order to spare me from whatever plague was crossing the village at that time. She never did come back for me — I heard she’d remarried, but died in childbirth a few months later. So I grew up with a foster family, in the end.”

“She abandoned you?”

“No… she protected me.” Tokaki shook his head. “The disease kept coming back to those parts and it was one of the poorest and harshest areas to live out of all of the desert land my people inhabit. She knew I was Tokaki — when she left me with the folk who raised me she did it because she knew Tokaki had to live. For Byakko’s sake she did all she could to protect me. And it worked, in the end. I’m not cross with her for what she

did."

He shrugged carelessly.

"I was a small kid. I don't really remember." He added. "And the people who brought me up were good folk — people I like and people who treated me like one of their own. They taught me to read and write, and I learnt to defend myself against thieves and vagabonds, thanks to their guidance. And now I'm strong and fit and ready to face Byakko's calling. So in the end, all's well that ends well."

He offered her a grin.

"Your concern is appreciated, however." He teased. "See, I knew you couldn't resist my charm completely, Suzuno-chan."

Suzuno's brows knitted together in annoyance, and Tokaki laughed.

"You said that if you were going to be Tokaki, you'd stop saying things like that." Suzuno folded her arms across her chest. "And you're still calling me Suzuno-chan, you know. Even though I'm calling you Tokaki-san."

"So drop the san and lets make it all a lot more pally." Tokaki suggested. "You should relax and take a joke or two, kid. Just because I say things doesn't mean I'm going to follow through with them."

He winked at her.

"You're Byakko no Miko, after all." He added. "You're safe because of that fact. No matter what I say, it's always going to be a case of look but don't touch."

"I don't understand." Despite herself, Suzuno faltered, and Tatara offered her a faint smile.

"Byakko's Miko is chosen for her purity as well as for her strength." He said lightly. "Tokaki knows that as well as I do. Chastity is one of the virtues valued in the Tiger's chosen maiden — all the legends say as much."

He gestured towards his friend, even as Suzuno's cheeks pinkened at the meaning in his words.

"This is how he always is." He explained. "Especially where women are concerned — you could say he has something of a weakness for a pretty face. But you'll come to find that he's a good person to have on your side, Suzuno-sama. As far as people you can trust go, I'd say Tokaki was one who'd sooner die than betray you."

"Really?" Suzuno looked doubtful, and Tokaki bristled.

“Hey, don’t look at me that way.” He protested. “Tatara knows me better than you do — why don’t you listen to him instead of eying me like I’m some kind of pervert hiding in the wings waiting for my chance to rip your clothes off? So I teased you — hell, I tease girls, it’s one of the perks of being a guy. But I told you. Tatara’s told you too. Byakko’s Miko has to be a virgin, and untouched by all that worldly concern shit. So you’re off limits. Noone’s going to do anything to you.”

Suzuno sighed, glancing down at her hands as she registered the genuine indignation in her companion’s tones.

At length she raised her gaze, blinking back the tears that longed to fall.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured. “I’m being harsh to you, I know. But I don’t understand this place and I… I don’t know you or Tatara-san or… I don’t know anything, yet. I don’t know who I can trust and who I can’t. All I know is that Takiko-neechan came to this ShijinTenchishou place and because she did, she died.”

“Well, that was Hokkan, and that was a whole other legend a whole other hundred years ago.” Tokaki said frankly. “I told you, didn’t I? Noone will let anything happen to you whilst we’re around to protect you. Just because Genbu’s people failed to protect their Priestess doesn’t mean we’re goin’ to be as lax as that. You’ve got Tatara and I to back you up, after all. Do you really think we’ll let you get hurt, when the whole of Sairou’s future might lie in your hands?”

Suzuno’s eyes widened, and Tatara offered her a smile.

“As Tokaki says.” He agreed simply. “We’re here to support and defend you, Suzuno-sama. If it costs our lives, that’s what we’ll do.”

“If it… costs…” Suzuno faltered. “Do you really think it’s going to be that dangerous?”

“Probably.” Tokaki said casually. “But it’s all right. We’re stronger than you think — even pretty-boy Tatara here packs a punch if he wants to, and when we’ve tracked down the rest of the Byakko Seishi, noone will be able to stand in our way. I have faith in that. Even if you want to be pessimistic about it — now you’re here I’m certain there’s something we can do to help Sairou.”

Suzuno was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then, at length, she nodded.

“All right.” She said softly. “I’m scared, but if you’re both willing to put so much into it, it would be rude of me to back off and reject your kindness. And I don’t want people to suffer because of me, even though I don’t want to be here. I think that this Byakko made a mistake, wanting

me to be his Miko. But since I'm here, and you're both convinced that I'm it, I suppose I have to… to try and be it. Don't I?"

"That's the spirit." Tokaki nodded approvingly. "And with that said, we'd all better prepare for a trek into the desert. You too, Tatara. Even I know that the Miko has to find her Seishi, and we won't do that hanging around here."

"True enough." Tatara got slowly to his feet, nodding his head. "I had intended to come with you, if you don't mind my company."

He scooped a length of ribbon up from one of the flower-decked surfaces, winding it into his thick dark hair till it fell in a loose tail down his back.

"I don't like using my powers for negative ends, but I'm ready to do so if the Miko requires it." He added, offering her a reassuring smile. "And I think we should both be by her side if she's going to travel through Sairou. Not everywhere is as calm and safe as this place, after all."

"No kidding." Tokaki agreed. "We'll be covering the smuggler's tracks through the mountains as much as anything else, won't we?"

"Smugglers?" Suzuno stared. "What kind of smugglers?"

"Gem ones, principally." Tatara told her. "There are thriving mines in the Kanin mountains, and not all of the treasure dug up there finds its way through the right channels. Smuggling across the Southern border is common, so I've heard. Though I've never encountered smugglers myself, some of the monks who travel out that way to administer aid have fallen foul of them from time to time. Some can be quite cut-throat and ruthless, all things considered."

"They sound scary." Suzuno shivered, and Tokaki nodded.

"That's why you need us with you." He told her. "I told you, didn't I? The folks who raised me taught me to fight properly, and I'm pretty good at it, too. And Tatara has his plants to call on for help — between us we'll keep you safe. Besides, I didn't say we were going that way yet. Just that we don't know where we might end up, searching for Seishi. We don't have any guidance, after all."

"No." Tatara looked thoughtful. "But I have read something in the scrolls pertaining to the Genbu legend that might be of some help."

"Which is?" Tokaki glanced at him in surprise, and Tatara smiled.

"Apparently the Genbu had the guidance of a being known as Taiitsukun." He said. "I've heard the name in many contexts, but I'm unsure as to what kind of being this creature might manifest itself as.

However, it's said that he — or she — inhabits a mountain known as Taikyoku-zan. And that if we can find that place, we might well be able to find out more about Byakko's purpose."

"Taikyoku-zan." Tokaki frowned. "I've never heard of it before. Have you?"

"Not in terms of its location. Only from these scrolls." Tatara shook his head.

"If this person helped Takiko-neechan, surely that means the mountain isn't in Sairou at all — but in Hokkan?" Suzuno ventured hesitantly. "Do we have to go all the way to that place to find out about Byakko?"

"Byakko's legend is rooted in Sairou. Not Hokkan." Tokaki agreed. "Tatara, do you really think this is worth pursuing?"

"Yes." Tatara looked thoughtful. "I do. The location of Taikyoku-zan wasn't recorded in the scrolls, but it seemed that it wasn't in Hokkan at all. It was in some other place — and that place might as easily have been here in Sairou, because the scrolls also mentioned that Taiitsukun would one day open the door to Byakko no Miko. It was that which first gave me the idea that Byakko's Priestess would be the next to come into this world — and it seems that we've proven that right. This Taiitsukun being seems to be something spiritual — not a person at all, because he or she has existed outside of time for more than a century. I don't know how to find this mountain, but I feel sure that, if we go looking, sooner or later we must."

"Well, there's only one mountain range in Sairou that could conceal a place of that importance." Tokaki got to his feet, hauling Suzuno up with him. "And that's the Kanin peaks. They're the ones always associated with Byakko in engravings and holy artworks, aren't they? Seems like as good a place to begin as anywhere."

He grinned.

"Right now, though, I vote we go back to my place and prepare anything we might need for a journey." He added. "Tatara, grab anything from here you think might be of use — we'll regroup in my hut and look at the best way to tackle a trek into the mountains. After all, the Kanin peaks aren't just holy places."

His eyes twinkled with anticipation.

"They're also the source of the jewel mines — and consequently the place from which smugglers most often ply their trade."

"No way."

Arina took a deep breath, clutching at her chest as slowly the

images faded and her wits began to grasp together pieces of reality. “Shit… no way. That was… what *was* that?”

She swallowed hard, feeling faintly nauseous as she glanced across the room at the discarded book. It lay open and, as she crawled towards it, she felt something cold touch her heart. Where the page had been blank, she now saw three short, concise lines of text.

“*Even when you’re in a different world, our hearts are tied together into one”*

She read slowly.

“Shit, what does that mean? And underneath… those are the characters for ‘Tatara’ again, right? Tatara… that guy who I just saw in that… whatever it was just now. He was… *he* was Tatara? Or did I just hallucinate it after all? This is too, too freaky!”

She bit her lip, a shiver running through her as she pictured the stranger’s handsome, sober features. Then her attention turned back to the page as she slowly ran her finger beneath the final line of text.

“*Byakko no Miko*.” She murmured, reading the five characters aloud. Then her eyes widened, her heart almost stopping in her chest as she registered the black letters that, unbidden, were now being scrawled across the page by some invisible hand.

“Kobayashi Arina.” She whispered. “Shit… but that’s *me*!”

Writer’s note:

“*Even when you’re in a different world, our hearts are tied together into one”*

This is the same as the quote at the beginning of the story — it’s stolen and translated from Tatara’s solo song “Seed” from the original anime soundtrack CDs.

The original line in Japanese is: *“Betsu no sekai ni itemo, kokoro wa hitotsu ni musubarete iru*”

(別の世界にいても 心は 1 つに結ばれている).

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

The sky was still heavy with cloud as the carriage rumbled along the uneven stone-chipped track-ways, heading further and further away from Sairou's central capital city with every turn of the wheels. Outside, the wind whipped threateningly against the wood-panels of the sturdy transport vehicle, as rain lashed down against the thin plates of glass that shielded the travellers inside from the worst of the elements without.

Ouba gazed out at the unhappy sky with a heavy heart, somehow feeling that the inclement weather was reflecting her own inner emotions.

Rain was rare in Sairou, except in winter, and prized when it did come, but Ouba had always hated the cold, depressing nature of the Western storms.

"All the rain for a whole year dropped on the land within a single day." She murmured softly, and at the sound of her voice her companion turned, offering her a sympathetic smile.

"We chose a bad day to travel, in the end, Hime." She said ruefully. "If you're right, and this is Sairou's rainfall for the year."

"It seems that way." Ouba sighed, sitting back against the cold fabric of her seat as the carriage rattled over another uneven dip in the road. "Sairou's desert is drought-ridden for most of the time. Yet when it rains, it rains with a fury and passion, just as though it thinks it'll never get another chance to do so."

She glanced at her hands, then,

"Somehow today it seems like the world is crying." She added. "Does that seem silly to you, Kinka? Its as though it's sad to see me leave… just as I'm sad to leave it, too."

"Overly morose, perhaps." Kinka reflected. "Hime, I know how you feel. I'm leaving people behind too, as it happens. But this is the Emperor's will. Lord Nefuru's also. Remember why we're travelling so far as we are — if they knew how sad you looked right now, they'd both be worrying about you."

"I know." Ouba admitted. "I'm sorry, Kinka. I'm becoming

repetitive and weak and I don't like it. But I've never been from home before. I suppose I've been overly protected so far in my life, and I hadn't really realised how sheltered I'd become. But it makes it hard to leave loved ones."

She offered a smile.

"But it's selfish of me, isn't it?" She realised. "You're taken away from Rouhei and that's my fault. Yet I'm complaining — I'm sorry, Kinka. I didn't mean to seem ungrateful."

"There's nothing you need to apologise for, Hime." Kinka shook her head. "I'm sworn to protect you and help you in whatever way you need… that's just how things have always been. I don't mind leaving Sairou if it's because you need me to leave. I'll miss Rouhei-sama, of course. He's done so many things for me it would be ungrateful not to. But I'd rather be by your side than alone at court without you. So don't worry on my account, Ouba-hime. I've no regrets in coming with you."

"Sashi said something to me, yesterday, when I went to say goodbye to my nephew." Ouba said thoughtfully, reaching down to finger the tree pendant that hung on its delicate chain around her neck. "About not letting this King of Kutou have his way with me just because he thinks he's bought himself a pretty Sairou bride. I've thought about it a lot — that I shouldn't let myself be forced into doing anything until I'm sure of my surroundings. Do you think that Kintsusei-sama would be angry, if I tried to hold back and stay aloof? At least, to begin with. It's just… he's so much older than me. He must have experience with women many times over already — he was a soldier King, isn't that what Nefuru's people said? Not only that, but he's been Emperor in his own right for almost twenty years. Even if he was fighting a war, and even if he didn't want to take a consort until peace was established, there's surely no way a grown man of thirty five or thereabouts would have shunned women completely."

She sighed.

"But I'm not that way." She added at length. "I have no experience to speak of, and I really don't know… how I should act."

"You're thinking about things deeply, Hime." Kinka looked surprised. "You haven't even met the Emperor of Kutou yet… maybe you should reserve all judgement until you meet him."

"But it makes me more nervous not to know what kind of person I've been tied to." Ouba admitted. "Kinka, has Rouhei said anything to you about Kintsusei of Kutou? Nothing written in the stars… nothing

at all?"

"Rouhei-sama concerns himself with Sairou's stars, Hime. Not Kutou's." Kinka said frankly. "But when I swore my allegiance to your Lord brother this morning, he told me that he'd been comforted by the reports he'd received on Kintsusei-sama's character. That should give you comfort too, I think. Nefuru-sama is a smart man and he doesn't say things he doesn't mean. If he feels that way then surely you can feel so too."

"I suppose you're right." Ouba pinkened. "But part of the problem is that I really don't know what he's going to expect of me. I haven't a clue what… I should do… when he's there."

"You mean when you're alone with him, or in general society?" Kinka looked curious, and Ouba shrugged.

"Either, or." She said helplessly. "I know the customs of Sairou's court and could act on them in my sleep. But I know nothing about the cult of Seiryuu or the way Kutou's people prefer to live. I don't want to offend anyone by being foreign and different, but I don't want to let go of my Sairou roots, either. So I don't really know how to act. And I certainly don't know how to be… when alone with a man. Let alone a man who may expect me to produce his son and heir."

"You really *are* thinking far too hard, Hime." Kinka said frankly. "As for Kutou's culture, we'll find out about that soon enough. I don't know much about it, either… even though my Father was there for a time, he didn't bother to convey any information about it back to me. So I'm as ignorant as you are in all respects."

"Your father…" Ouba hesitated, then she sighed.

"I'm sorry again." She said contritely. "Bringing your thoughts back towards him again."

"As I've told you before, Hime, it has nothing to do with me or my feelings." Kinka said flatly. "I don't blame anyone in Kutou for handing my father over to Heiboutei-heika's justice and I have no intention of pursuing the matter when we arrive. He was a criminal and he deserved his punishment. There's nothing more to be said."

She looked sad.

"If anything, the Kei family owe Kutou something for the trouble he caused while there." She added. "Because he got involved with rebels and wound up dragging our name through their blood-stained cause while he was in exile in the East. It amazes me that the Emperor's people had the forbearance not to take their own revenge, but to sell

him back to Sairou to face his proper liege Lord and true justice before Byakko."

"I suppose so." Ouba looked thoughtful. "That Emperor was Kintsusei-sama, wasn't it?"

"Must've been, since he's been Emperor twenty years. You said so yourself, Hime… he's been King there a long time."

Kinka frowned.

"I don't know whether he'll either know the name Kei or remember the past association with my Father." She added. "It may be he doesn't, since from what Rouhei told me, Father was dispatched back to Sairou on the command of a military official who was acting in judgement over one of Kutou's courts. It may be that Kintsusei-sama never encountered him directly after all. But just in case he did, Ouba-hime… I hope my coming with you won't be a cause of trouble."

"Well, I won't let them send you away." Obstinacy glittered in Ouba's eyes and she shook her head. "You're my last shred of security in this strange world I'm going into. You're loyal to me and I have no doubts about that. Your father's crimes were his crimes, and you're not like him. You're like Rouhei has said before — more Han-ke than Kei-ke. So you shouldn't worry. It would be an insult to Sairou, after all, for them to cast judgement against the chosen companion of the Princess of the West."

"I hope you're right." A faint smile touched Kinka's lips, and Ouba nodded.

"I'm sure I am." She said, conviction in her tones. "After all, you're born of noble blood, when it comes down to it. Your current situation is because of your father's foolishness, but Rouhei's always made sure you had respect at court, and I'd like to think I've never treated you as a common servant. You've been more like a sister in a lot of ways since you first came into my service… so I won't let them do anything where you're concerned."

She grinned, despite herself.

"Who knows." She added lightly. "Maybe there'll be a handsome lord at Kutou's court who won't care about your past connections and who'll fall madly in love with you the moment we arrive."

Kinka stared for a moment, then she burst out laughing.

"I very much doubt that will happen, Hime." She said ruefully. "Sometimes you let your romantic side run away with you — has

anyone ever told you that before?"

"Mm, from time to time." Ouba admitted. "But the truth is, I'd like it if one of us could marry for love at the very least."

She sighed, suddenly serious again.

"It won't be me." She added matter-of-factly. "An arranged match rarely ends in love, even if it can end in respect and tolerance. But there's still hope for you, isn't there? And if it did happen, I'd definitely not stand in your way."

"Well, at the moment my only interest is keeping you safe and trying to prevent you from moping in homesickness." Kinka sat back more comfortably in her seat, arranging her skirts absently over her knees as she did so. "That's a full time job in itself, you know… taking care of a Princess of Sairou."

"Which is a subtle hint for me to stop complaining, I suppose." Ouba sighed. "All right. I suppose so. I need to find the positives in this. After all, I'm marrying a man of status. My family's honour won't be tarnished by the match. I don't have any secret lover I'm leaving behind, so there's noone to break their heart over me. Kintsusei-sama is the Emperor who stopped the civil war in Kutou, and he's not supposed to be the lecherous demon his late father was rumoured to be. And I could do much worse than be a consort at a royal court. Couldn't I?"

"There's always another possibility, too." Kinka reflected, and Ouba glanced at her in surprise.

"Possibility?" She echoed, and Kinka grinned, mischief flecking in her aquamarine eyes.

"The Emperor of Kutou is thirty five, without a harem in residence at his court." She said matter-of-factly. "His interest in you is political, but he did not seek your hand — rather your father put you forward as an eligible match, and he accepted the terms. He has not actively sought a female companion in all that time in power — even despite the war, don't you find it odd?"

"Odd?" Ouba's brow creased in confusion. "In what respect? If he's a soldier King and he was fighting on the battlefield, would he have had time to find a wife?"

"I don't think he's been a soldier King in the way you think he has." Kinka shook her head. "If I'm right and my father's fate was settled by one of Kutou's military officials and not Kintsusei-sama himself, he may well not be as involved in the fighting side of things as he was

before he took the throne. Which leaves the question — with his dynasty obviously so unstable, why not marry at an earlier opportunity? Or at least, have women at court for that purpose. Emperors have harems. We know that."

She gestured towards Ouba.

"Lady Rie, your mother, is Heiboutei-heika's chosen and favoured consort." She added. "And people refer to her as Empress because of it. But, if you'll forgive me for saying it, The Emperor has had other ladies in that time. That's simply the way of Kings — isn't it?"

"Yes." Ouba looked thoughtful. "I suppose it is. You're right. Mother is Father's Queen and the only one he permits to reside at the palace itself, these days. But he has had other women and he has provided households and servants for each of the ones which have born him children. Half-siblings I've never even met — but yes, blood of the Emperor just the same."

"So why hasn't *Kintsusei-sama* followed that path?" Kinka asked. "Because of the war, or because of something else?"

"I don't follow." Ouba shook her head. "Even if you're right, I don't see…"

"Perhaps Kintsusei-sama isn't the kind of King who looks for female companionship after all." Kinka spread her hands. "And if so, his demands on you may not be as heavy as you fear. If he needs just an heir, then that may be the only time he seeks to be so closely in your company. If you see my train of thought, Ouba-hime — it might be that you really are just the solution to his dynastic and political problems, and not a remedy for Imperial lust."

"You say some horrible things sometimes." Ouba flushed. "Imperial lust indeed — Kinka!"

"Sorry." Kinka shrugged her shoulders. "But you do understand now, don't you? That Kintsusei-sama might be… of that persuasion."

"You mean that he might like Princes and not Princesses, don't you?" Ouba frowned, and Kinka nodded.

"Is it impossible?" She asked simply. "It happens, after all. Men at court aren't always in want of a wife — even in Sairou that's true. Why would Kutou differ? People are people. Besides…"

"Besides?"

"I've heard one story about Kutou's Emperor that made me wonder this." Kinka folded her hands together in her lap. "Nefuru-sama's men

reported to Rouhei-sama that Kintsusei-sama is in the constant companionship of a former slave — a member of a tribe known as the Meihi who settled along the Eastern borderlands from the North country a long long time ago. From all accounts this former slave is very closely intertwined in the Emperor's trust — born without status and dragged out of bonds, yet somehow gifted the privilege and the power of one born of noble blood. Apparently this Meihi individual has been at the Emperor's side since he was still a soldier and not a King at all… and even after all this time their connection has not been broken. If that doesn't smack of suspicion, what does?"

"I see." Ouba rubbed her temples. "Then you think he already has a lover… and I'm just… for show?"

"Maybe."

"Should I be insulted or relieved by that?" Ouba wondered, and Kinka smiled.

"Perhaps I'm wrong." She said evenly. "But it's a train of thought that's worth pursuing. At least there must be a reason for his reticence with the opposite sex. Even if he's not so inclined, it may be that he's shy and awkward around women — not the type to force himself on you without thought or reason. Whatever the root of it, I don't think he's someone you should fear. I'm sure that you are quite equal to the situation, whatever it proves to be."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of my future husband having a live-in male lover." Ouba said seriously. "And the whole slave thing… slaves don't exist in Kutou now, do they?"

"No, not since the end of the war."

"And it was Kintsusei-sama who stopped that?"

"So it would seem."

"I wonder if there's a connection."

"Well, it's possible." Kinka shrugged. "You never know."

She cast her companion a keen glance.

"This is a very low key form of transport for a Princess." She reflected. "Has that got your mood down too, Ouba-hime? The people should be lining the streets to say their farewells — yet it's all been done quite quietly and without ceremony. Does it make you feel unnoticed, or are you happier without the fuss?"

"I think I'd probably cry, if it was a big public affair." Ouba

confessed. “And I know that it’s for my safety we’re travelling this way. It’s a long journey, after all, and bandits and cutthroats still lurk along the side of busy roads. We’re much less noticeable this way. And if noone sees me go… noone can see me cry like a silly, homesick idiot when we cross the Western border.”

She frowned, eying her friend keenly.

“Kinka, can I ask you something?” She asked hesitantly, and Kinka looked surprised, nodding her head.

“Of course.” She agreed. “What is it? Something else on your mind?”

“In a way.” Ouba pursed her lips, glancing at her companion’s bandaged right hand as she did so. “You spilled blood before my brother this morning when you swore to protect me, and you did it with his blessed blade, didn’t you — a proper oath before advancing into enemy territory.”

“Hardly enemy, but yes.” Kinka agreed. “What of it, Hime?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” Ouba looked pensive. “Just… the other night you ran out of my chamber like your feet were on fire, and you’ve not given me any kind of explanation for it yet. I thought that you were always going to be honest with me — and if you’re willing to go so far as to make a blood oath to my brother over my safety, it makes me wonder why you haven’t told me what happened. I was worried about you — but you’re just acting like nothing ever happened.”

Kinka’s expression became troubled, and Ouba saw her friend’s beautiful aquamarine eyes cloud over. Slowly she shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Hime.” She said softly. “But I can’t. I gave Rouhei-sama my word to speak of it to noone but him, and to leave it to his discretion what to do about it. It concerns something he saw in the stars, but that’s as much as I can say. Even if I wanted to tell you, I don’t see what purpose it would serve. But as it stands, I can’t. So I haven’t. And I’m sorry, but I won’t betray my promise to him.”

Ouba’s brows knitted together.

“You sound so solemn.” She observed. “And that look is back in your eyes — the one that tells me you’re frightened of something but you don’t want to voice whatever it is. I understand if you made a promise to Rouhei, but even so, Kinka… you scare me when you act that way. It isn’t like you — and I’m worried.”

Kinka hesitated for a moment, then raised her gaze to her

companion's.

"I'm sorry I made you feel that way." She said quietly, her expression still unreadable. "But I promise, Ouba-hime, it's nothing you should be afraid of. On the contrary, since I've sworn to protect you from harm, you know that's what I'll do. Whatever happens — you can trust in me to do that. And if danger strikes, or if something changes…"

She faltered for a moment, then nodded, resolution in her gaze.

"You've no need to worry." She said firmly. "You're my number one priority when we get to Kutou and I promised your brother that as well as Rouhei. Most likely nothing will even come of it. But even if it does, I'll take care of everything. I promise."

"It looks like there are storms on the horizon."

Hikari rested her elbows on the sill of the Ri farm's front window, letting out a sigh as she gazed out across the stretch of land which marked the family's territory. Even now she could see the first shoots of plants beginning to push their way through the surface as spring, always early in the South spread its way from the mountains across towards the Northern border.

"I thought it was going to rain on me the whole ride over here — it would have been typical, if I'd got drenched on the way."

"We're glad to see you again too, Hikari-chan."

The room's other occupant glanced up from the letter he was reading, shooting his young charge an amused smile, and Hikari blushed, shaking her head as she turned to meet his twinkling ruby gaze with sheepish hazel eyes.

"That wasn't what I meant, Chichiri." She said reproachfully. "And you know it. I just… I'm still not used to riding my own horse, even if Shizuka does live up to her name and is the quietest horse in Reizeitei-sama's stables. It would have been twice as difficult a trip if the ground had been slippery — I'm glad I managed to get here before the heavens opened."

"In truth, I'm glad you are too." Chichiri owned, setting aside the letter as he eyed her pensively. "You may be almost a young woman in your own right now, Hikari, and strong enough to repel the most forward of robbers if you put your mind to using the gifts Suzaku gave you. But I still worry about you making the trip back here from Eiyou. It's a good three hour ride on a good day, and that's for a confident

rider. You've overcome your fears pretty well, you know, but even so… it's a risk, coming back here by yourself on such a long journey. I did give your parents my word I'd look out for you, after all — if anything happened, I wouldn't forgive myself."

"I'm okay." Hikari got to her feet, smoothing her skirts as she came to perch beside him. "And I'm grateful for everything you and Aidou-san have done for me since we came back to the ShijinTenchishou, Chichiri. You do know that, right? I miss Mother and Father still, of course. Even Makoto, from time to time, and I worry about Ari-chan being in Tokyo all by herself. But since there's no way around it, I've tried to make the best of things here. And it would have been much harder if I hadn't had this place to call home."

"I'm happy to hear it." Chichiri's expression softened. "Because everyone here is fond of you too, you know. It has begun to feel like I have two daughters, instead of one — and Eiju and Meikyo look up to you a whole lot, too. You'll always have a home on the farm to come back to, Hikari-chan. Whether you go to the palace to study or keep Boushin company, or whether you finally choose to take the step and marry Aoi — we'll always be your family in this world. Remember that, all right? There's no time limit on that promise."

Hikari smiled, taking in her guardian's features as she did so. The first time they had met, she remembered ruefully, she had been both frightened and repulsed by the ugly winding scar that stretched across the place where once the sorcerer's left eye had been, but now she found it hard to imagine why she had ever thought Chichiri anything but warm and welcoming in his appearance. It was true that he could not be called handsome, since despite the fact the wound had occured more than twenty years earlier, there was no hiding the severity of the original blow. But somehow, Hikari mused, his lop-sided appearance seemed to fit in with his quirky, off-beat personality. Since the day she had arrived in the ShijinTenchishou a year and a half earlier, she had found herself turning to him more and more for help and advice, and now, with the doorway to her own world locked and barred, she had come to look on him as a second father.

At almost forty four, he was no longer a young man, and his apothecary lifestyle had brought with it the physical labour of tending the farm herbs. Despite that, however, the Suzaku spirit that ran through his veins had prevented him from becoming stooped or worn like some of his village neighbours and though he was no longer the young man he had been when he had first joined up with Hikari's mother Miaka to summon Suzaku and save Kounan, there was still a vibrant life and sparkle in his good eye that indicated a man content

with his lot in life.

Some seventeen years earlier, Chichiri — or to give him his true name, Ri Hou Jun — had married his wife Aidou, the older sister of his Suzaku comrade Tasuki, and since then had two children of his own — a son Eiju, now almost fourteen, and a daughter Meikyo, who was pushing ten years old. To Hikari, who had grown up with a younger brother she had always hated, it had been natural to slip into the role of older sister and when she had realised that returning home was no longer an option, the two Ri children's enthusiasm and affection had helped to soothe the wrenched heart as she had accepted leaving everything she had once held dear behind.

"This world has a lot of good things in it." She reflected now. "And so does the world I started out in. But neither one is complete. I guess it's true you can't have everything… the older you get, the more you realise that."

She shrugged.

"Still, I have you all, and Aoi, and friends like Shishi on the mountain and Reizeitei-sama at court." She said contemplatively. "Even friends as far away as Kutou, since Myoume and I still keep in touch by letter… sort of. And I have control of my magic now, thanks to all the hard work you put me through when we first came back here."

Amusement touched Chichiri's features and he nodded.

"I'm not sure it counts as corresponding with Myoume, since you have to get someone to write the letter as you dictate it, and then read you her response." He teased. "You have to work harder on your kanji, Hikari — you're far too old to be illiterate, and considering your position these days, it's almost unforgivable."

"I'm trying, I'm trying." Hikari defended herself. "Even Reizeitei-sama has been helping me. I'm just not naturally smart like he is, or like Aoi. I've never been academic. Even Meikyo can run rings around me when it comes to reading and writing."

She sighed.

"Maybe I ought to get *her* to teach me." She said sheepishly. "She probably could."

Chichiri laughed, shaking his head.

"I don't think its as bad as that." He told her. "But at least you are putting your mind to it. Since you spend so much time at court these

days, and since Aoi is there a lot too… it would be easy to get distracted."

"Perhaps." Hikari pinkened. "But he has a lot of work to do, too. On Kintsusei-sama's behalf. So I don't see him all the time."

She sat back against the seat, eying her companion quizzically.

"Was there anything important in Reizeitei-sama's letter? He asked me to deliver it, so I wondered if it was something urgent."

"Not especially." Chichiri shook his head. "Like you, Hikari-chan, Boushin… Reizeitei-sama has no way of speaking to his father. In some respects I've been to him what I've been to you — someone to call on or talk to when there's been a need. As I lost so many of my own friends and relatives in the Shouryuu flood, I understand being severed from loved ones as well as anyone. He and I have always corresponded on some level, even though I've not been at court as often as I know he'd like. His letter is simply an invite to attend a function in the next few weeks… and from the undertones I think he's probably going to ask my advice on something. That's all."

"Maybe its about his harem." Hikari suggested, and Chichiri looked startled.

"His harem?"

"Mm." Hikari nodded. "We had a chat about it the other day. That his councillors are kicking up a fuss because apparently some Sairou Princess is going to marry the Kutou Emperor and apparently this is a bad thing, although it has nothing to do with Kounan. Reizeitei-sama didn't seem bothered about it, but some of his ministers are a bit… er… obsessive about the marriage thing. So much so they've even been trying to suggest he marry *me*."

"I can imagine Aoi-kun's reaction to that." Chichiri chuckled. "But it was the same in Hotohori-sama's day. His ministers were very keen on finding him a wife. And in the end he chose a good one — Houki-sama is a sensitive and intelligent woman who has raised her son with the best values and I imagine if he was here today, Hotohori-sama himself would say that he couldn't find fault in his successor. Boushin is twenty soon, after all. I would think they'd be very anxious to find him a girl soon."

"Yes, that's what he said, pretty much." Hikari agreed. "He asked if I might be a go-between for him, when the women are summoned to the palace. And I said I would. After all, he calls me his sister. And it seems a sisterly thing to do."

“Well, if it’s that he wants to speak to me about, I’m probably not going to be a lot of help.” Chichiri reflected. “But I suppose we’ll see. It might not be that at all.”

He frowned, glancing towards the window as the first shards of rain came splattering down against the glass.

“And the rain is here.” He murmured. “Just as you predicted.”

“It’s been looking grey all morning.” Hikari stretched her arms over her head, stifling a yawn. “I suppose I should go and help Aidou and Meikyo in the kitchen, but I’m just too tired.”

“And I have herbs to tie and prescriptions to write.” Chichiri admitted. “If it would be less tiring, you could help me with that. At least, you could do the tying and I’ll do the writing — does that seem fair?”

“I suppose so.” Hikari agreed. “Eiju isn’t home?”

“He went to the mountain this morning.” Chichiri shook his head. “At least, I suppose that’s where he is — I expect Tasuki and the others will keep him till the rain passes, knowing how Aidou feels about her kids being out in the elements when there’s a perfectly good shelter nearby. But Maichu came at dawn this morning to take him off to practice, and I’ve not seen or heard anything from him since.”

He got to his feet.

“I have to hand it to him, actually.” He reflected pensively. “Maichu’s still young himself — brash and impulsive on occasion, too. But he has Eiju’s measure and he’s drummed respect and loyalty into the boy since he asked whether or not he could take over the sword training from Kouji. To begin with, Eiju really wasn’t keen and I know he did a fair bit of answering back when he thought I couldn’t hear him. But now he’s up and waiting for Maichu to come when it’s a training day — he can’t wait to get started.”

“You’re resigned to him becoming a soldier, then?” Hikari asked curiously, and Chichiri shrugged.

“Eiju has Kou blood as well as Ri blood.” He said simply. “He takes far more after Tasuki than he does me in many respects. And Aidou won’t hear of him going to the mountain on a permanent basis. She’s said it’s bad enough having a younger brother for a bandit Kashira, and she’s not going to have her son following the same path. So this is the compromise. When he turns fourteen, Eiju will probably go to Eiyou and become a recruit of the Imperial Guard. I’ve spoken to Bou… Reizeitei-sama and he’s agreed to arrange a place for him if

necessary. And that's that. At least with Kounan at peace, hopefully his duties will be largely ceremonial and not too physical."

"I think Maichu will teach him enough so that even if it did get physical, he'd be all right." Hikari reflected. "Maichu is strong, even if he doesn't have Aoi's celestial blood. In fact, he'd probably beat Aoi in a fight, now. Aoi hasn't touched a sword except in his official presentation ceremony when Kintsusei-sama deployed him to the South as his emissary. He's afraid of losing control and letting the Seiryuu spirit take over — so he's given it up completely."

"And Maichu has put his demons aside and embraced bandit life wholeheartedly." Chichiri agreed, leading the way into the little back-room where clusters of cut herbs drawn from the Spring's earliest plants lay scattered on the work surface, waiting for someone to tend to them. "In the end, all ended well."

"I wonder about that, sometimes." Hikari mused, pushing the door carefully shut behind her as she surveyed the small work-room fondly. Although she enjoyed her time at the palace, she realised, somehow this place was still far more home from home.

"About what, exactly?" Chichiri eyed her keenly, and Hikari grinned.

"You have to promise not to repeat it, because I don't want Shishi to hit me." She warned, and Chichiri laughed, nodding his head.

"I promise, although I think I guess where this is going." He remarked, scooping up the list of prescription ingredients up off the unit as he scanned down them carefully. "You're talking about the interesting working chemistry she and Maichu have developed, aren't you?"

"Somewhat." Hikari giggled. "Though she'd never admit it in a million years."

"I'd noticed it too." Chichiri nodded. "But as you say, Tasuki's cub is a law unto herself and she's always been adamantly against anything romantic. Still, she is sixteen now. She's not a child any more than you are. And her rapport with Maichu is not like the one she and Jin shared. Jin was always like her older brother — they grew up that way, so it couldn't have been any different. But Maichu is a foreigner and a newcomer to her pack, in a sense. There's no way she can see him as a brother. The karma is all wrong."

"I'm glad it isn't just me who wonders." Hikari admitted. "But Shishi'll probably be the last person to realise it — if she ever does."

“She’s her father’s daughter in a lot of ways.” Chichiri agreed. “Can you pass me that bundle over there, Hikari-chan? I need a couple of leaves fresh before you tie them and hang them to dry.”

“This?” Hikari reached across to touch the nearest cluster of stems and leaves, and Chichiri nodded.

“If you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” Hikari did as she was bidden. “You know, when I’m at the palace, everyone calls me Hikari-hime and treats me like a Princess. But somehow, I prefer being here like this. Is that odd? It just seems more… natural. Reizeitei-sama is probably the only person other than Aoi there who treats me totally normally. It’s really surreal.”

“Well, you are an important person in Kounan.” Chichiri reminded her. “The personification of Suzaku’s divine power in a living, breathing human being. That’s never before happened, and probably won’t ever again. You need to accept that, Hikari. Here, in a Suzaku household, you’re part of the family. But there, in the palace where Hotohori’s corpse lies sleeping below the Phoenix’s statue… you are something else.”

“The symbol of love and rebirth.” Hikari sighed. “I know. I know. It’s just weird. Because I still feel like Hikari. Even though having magic and all of that is totally different from how my life was before, at the end of it I’m still Hikari. It’s just odd, that’s all.”

She frowned.

“Chichiri, do you think anyone in my world will ever open that book again?”

“The book that leads here, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Impossible to say.” Chichiri shrugged his shoulders. “In theory, the legends should all be completed now. But I don’t know what the future holds. And I can’t speak for what might happen in your world, either.”

“True. Me either.” Hikari admitted. “But if I was Seiryuu’s Miko — you’re right. That should be the end of it.”

Chichiri pursed his lips, setting the herbs down as he eyed her keenly.

“Something on your mind, Hikari?” He asked softly, and Hikari started, then shook her head.

“No, nothing particularly.” She responded. “I just… I think it’s all the rain and gloom in the atmosphere. It seems especially heavy today for some reason. Dark and claustrophobic. That’s all.”

“Hrm.” Chichiri’s expression became thoughtful and he nodded his head.

“I wondered if you’d picked up on it, too.” He admitted, and Hikari stared at him in dismay.

“You mean… there’s something to pick up?” She demanded, and Chichiri shrugged.

“I don’t know.” He said honestly. “Just, like you, I’ve sensed something uncertain and disjointed in the atmosphere. It may just be the changing of the seasons — the rain coming to wash away the last of the winter chill. But I don’t know for sure. In the past an atmospheric change has generally heralded a spiritual one. And I’ve learnt to trust my senses when it happens.”

“But what kind of spiritual change?” Hikari frowned. “We just said that the legends had all ended… what could be up?”

“I don’t know if anything is up.” Chichiri shook his head. “I told you, it’s not a ‘knowing’ kind of a feeling. Just a vague sensation tugging at the edge of my consciousness. The atmosphere isn’t as stable and serene as it usually is. But the electricity of a storm could have caused that. It’s just… maybe it’s a gut feeling, you know. That something else is about to happen. Something none of us have bargained for.”

“Something bad…?”

“Possibly.” Chichiri spread his hands helplessly. “Hikari, it’s not something you should worry about. But if you sense things, you should trust in that instinct. It might be nothing — it may have no connection to us or anything that’s going on in Kounan. But it’s as well to be alert — okay? Just in case. Keep your wits about you.”

“I guess.” Hikari chewed on her lip. “I’ll try. I thought it was just me being silly, but if you feel it too — maybe not.”

“Maybe not.” Chichiri agreed. “For now, don’t mention it to Aidou or the children, all right? We’ll wait and see if anything comes of it first — no sense in causing undue panic if there’s no need.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Hikari assured him. “I don’t want to think that it’s anything other than the weight of the storms over Kounan.”

“And it might yet be.” Chichiri acknowledged, glancing pensively

across towards the window. “But somehow I get the definite sensation of the heavens shifting… as if to herald the start of something else.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

“Return to Morioka please.”

Arina cast the ticket office attendant a warm smile, tucking a lock of stray dark hair behind her ear as she glanced idly up at the clock hanging on the wall behind him. It was early, she mused ruefully, to be up and about on a Saturday, and yet she had barely slept the night before for anticipation of the day to come. In the end she had spoken to Keisuke by telephone the night before, and although she had omitted the strange events that had occurred since she had opened Suzuno’s diary, she had told him of her plans to take a trip to the place where Byakko no Miko had been laid to rest several years earlier. He had been surprised, she mused to herself. Still, he had not hesitated in giving her details on how to find the cemetery, although he had advised her that he did not know whether anyone who had known Suzuno well would still be in the Morioka area. He had not asked her why she had suddenly decided to take the trip, and Arina had found it difficult to know how to bring up the subject. After all, she had acknowledged, even when thinking it over to herself she knew it sounded like as the delusion of a tired mind working overtime between school, the library and her own personal investigation.

In the end she had decided not to try and broach the matter over the phone, but instead she had resolved to note down everything she had gleaned from Suzuno’s diary so far, with the intention of showing it to him and asking his honest opinion on her findings. Whether or not he knew anything about Byakko’s legend beyond the diary’s contents, she did not know. But if he had had similar experiences with the book, she knew that as soon as he saw her own notes, he would understand.

“But then, Keisuke-san said it wasn’t a magic book, so he can’t have seen what I saw.” She reflected inwardly as she pushed the ten thousand yen note through the divide, taking her change and her ticket with another smile. “He told me it was just an old diary but I think he was wrong. If I go to Morioka, I might be able to understand more about why. Maybe once I’ve got it out of my system, everything will make a lot more sense.”

“Platform twenty two, miss.” The attendant added helpfully. “It’s

due in about five minutes time, the first direct service to Morioka."

"Thanks." Arina nodded, sliding the tickets into her purse and turning on her heel. Tokyo's central station was as busy as it ever was, with people going to work and to visit relatives and friends in other parts of the country. When she had been tiny, she vaguely remembered trips via Shinkansen from Tokyo to Kyouto to visit her now departed grandmother, and despite herself a faintly wistful pang settled in her heart. It had been one of the few times she could ever recall the Kobayashis doing anything as a family, and as she made her way onto the already crowded platform, she found herself regretting the fact that she did not have more like memories.

"Maybe Mum and Dad and I were a family, then." She wondered absently. "But if we were, the novelty wore off a long time ago."

The train was already waiting when she arrived and she was quick to get a seat, settling herself in a corner by the window as she rummaged through her bag for the magazine she had brought for the trip. It was more than two and a half hours, she knew, to her destination in the heart of Iwate-ken, even at the speed of the Bullet Train, and she had been careful to bring with her both food and reading materials to pass the time on the long trip.

As she did so, her fingers brushed against the worn old notebook, and she frowned, hesitating then pulling it out as she set it on the table before her.

She had not opened it again since that evening, for part of her was afraid of it and what it might do next. Instead she had curled up in the relative sanctuary of her bedroom with pen and paper as she had struggled to make sense of what she had seen. Although she could not remember every detail, she had found that as soon as she began to write, the recollections of faces and names had become more vivid, and at length she had ceased her note-taking altogether, instead letting the pencil guide across the page in a rough sketch of the things and people she had seen.

From an early age, Arina had liked to draw, though her business-focused father and ambitious mother had always overlooked the skill, and so it, like so many other things in her life, had fallen by the wayside. However, with the colours and sensations still burning through her senses, she had found it easy to depict the likenesses of both the gypsyish Tokaki and the elegant Tatara, working late into the night as she perfected every slight detail she could. By the time she had finished, it had been almost two o' clock in the morning, and she had reluctantly set pencil and paper aside. By the time dawn had

broken, she had been less convinced as to whether what she had seen had really been a memory or a delusion, and she had taken her notes and her pictures, folding them and bundling them into an envelope. After a moment of hesitation, she had scrawled Keisuke's name across the front, adding a brief note to the contents and then, on her way to the station, she had taken a detour along the street where her recent mentor lived, slipping the thick package through his letterbox before hurrying off to the station to catch her train. He would be at work today, she knew that — but she had already resolved to call by the Yuuki residence on her way home that evening, with the hope that they could go over the details together.

Although the more cautious, self-preserving aspect of her nature was telling her that the book was dangerous, even hallucinogenic, she could not resist its call. Despite her common sense warning her that the further in she got, the more difficult she would find it to pull out, the temptation to try and tap into Suzuno's world a third time teased at her senses.

"But on the train it's not a good idea." She said aloud, setting it aside as at length she found the fashion magazine she wanted. Dropping it down onto the table, she flipped it open, scanning through the pages half-heartedly as the sleek white train began to pull out of Tokyo's station. It was funny, she mused, how she had come to do more and more things on her own since Hikari had gone to the other world. Once, she knew, a trip like this would have been an excuse to invite as many people as possible and now there would be a gaggle of giggly, teasing teenage girls gathered around the magazine, making jokes about the models and expressing aloud their desire for an increase in their allowance. In those days, Arina knew she had been the envy of many of her classmates, for when she had wanted to buy something, there had not been an obstacle to her getting it. Girls and boys alike had gravitated to her wit and spirit, but also her affluent background and casual way of treating the people with her on a whim, and as she reflected back on it, she realised how false a lot of it had been. Real friends had existed, she reminded herself — girls like Kyouko, and of course, like Hikari. But for the most part, since she had tamed down her social life and turned her attention to her studies, she had been far less the centre of the crowd.

Yet somehow she had come to prefer it that way. Though she still took care of her appearance, she was no longer obsessive about her hair or her make-up the way she had been during her middle teens, and though she had been asked out several times since starting high school, she ruefully acknowledged to herself that Chieki's observations had been fairly accurate.

“I’ve become Ms Look-But-Don’t-Touch.” She muttered. “Hard to get. But I’m not interested in guys right now. Or fashion. Or any of this superficial rubbish. Keisuke-san was right when he said this whole thing can easily become an obsession. I know I spend far too much time looking into it. But somehow, I can’t *not* look into it. Whether it’s wrong or not — the ShijinTenchishou has little by little taken over my whole life.”

She frowned, gazing distractedly out at the passing scenery. Of everything, she knew, one thing had bothered her the most. The slow, carefully scripted kanji that, in old-fashioned lettering had comprised the four characters of her own name still seemed to be burnt into her thoughts, and the more she considered it, the more it set her on edge.

“Why would I see *my* name there?” She wondered aloud, drumming her fingers absently on the table in frustration. Across the aisle, a couple of businessmen in black suits sent her an annoyed look at the disturbance, but she was oblivious to them, wrapped up entirely in her own thoughts. “It was gone again a second later, so maybe that bit I did imagine. But if I imagined that, I could have imagined everything. Oh, this is no good. Maybe I should have taken it to Keisuke-san and discussed it with him before I left after all — but I didn’t want to wait longer than I had to.”

She touched her fingers to the window, staring across the speeding Japanese landscape. Somehow, she realised, it was like Morioka had called to her.

“Because Suzuno-san is buried there?” She mused. “Or for some other reason? Maybe I really am losing my wits. Considering everything that’s happened recently, I suppose it can’t be ruled out.”

At that moment the guard came down the train to check tickets, and Arina rummaged in her purse, producing the slip of white card. Inwardly she was grateful for the moment of distraction from the direction in which her thoughts had been heading, for a prickle had travelled up her spine at the thought of some invisible force somehow drawing her to take the train north.

Morioka was simply Suzuno-san’s home, she reminded herself firmly, as she returned her purse to her bag. It was the place she had lived and the place she had died — but that was all.

As the train drew into Ueno station, she cast the book another hesitant glance, reaching across to finger the worn fabric of the covers. Absently she found herself wondering if Hikari’s own entrance to the ShijinTenchishou had been as disorientating as Suzuno’s, and

for the first time she began to realise how much her friend had chosen to take on by becoming Seiryuu no Miko. Images of Tatara's floral paradise flashed unbidden across her thoughts and she frowned, scooping up the book and holding it tightly in her hands.

"Hi-chan said the people with her had magic. That even she did." She reflected. "But even so… surely it's too fantastic to believe that what I saw was ever real. Besides, Suzuno-san is still a stranger to me. Why would I see anything connected with someone I've never met? It makes no sense. I started researching all of this for Hikari's sake. Not because I cared about Sairou or any of the other Priestesses that went before. They're just names, surely… why do I suddenly feel so connected to Suzuno-san and more importantly, to this Byakko legend?"

Slowly she set the book down on the table, then, not without misgivings in her heart, she carefully opened the covers, smoothing the pages down as she gazed at the blank white pages. As before, nothing was written there — not even the three lines of text which had followed her last flash of pictures, and as she turned over the next page, Arina felt a slight pang of disappointment that nothing had reached out to touch her this time. The diary was empty, sure enough, the edges of the pages curled and coloured with age, and for the first time it had the appearance of an ordinary, worn notebook.

"Nothing?" She mused, turning over another page, but it too was blank. "Does it only work when I'm in Tokyo, then? But that makes no sense. What has Tokyo got to do with Suzuno-san and Morioka? Why would I feel so compelled to go North like this if it wasn't important?"

She gripped the notebook more tightly, glaring at it accusingly.

"Stop playing games with me." She ordered, ignoring the dark looks that the two businessmen once more sent her way. "Either be a normal notebook or don't, but don't chop and change. If you're going to tell me about Suzuno-san, do it. And if not, at least give me what you gave Keisuke-san so there's something that I can read!"

Almost as soon as the words had left her mouth, Arina felt a prickle of something surge up around the tips of her fingers and her eyes widened as she registered the tiny, faint flares of pearl white light that, little by little had begun to curl around her hands. Unable to release her grip, Arina could only stare in confused disbelief as, on the page before her, the faded lines seemed to swirl and blur, becoming less and less distinct with every passing second. The train, and even the scenery flying by the window suddenly seemed a mile away as Arina felt the sharp spark of magic flood through her system, lodging

itself deep within her chest as little by little darkness poured into her vision from every angle. As she sunk into the oblivious lure of the book, she realised that somehow she had managed once more to trigger the strange spell that hexed through Suzuno's century old memories. Then, in the next instant Arina was gone completely, and she was once more swept up in the perspective of another.

"How far does this desert stretch for, anyhow?"

Suzuno paused to take a breath, wiping the sweat from her brow as she cast her companions an exhausted glance. "I know you said that Sairou was dry, but even so, surely this must end somewhere? Unless we've been going round in circles — Tokaki, are you sure this is the way to those mountains you mentioned?"

"Are you suggesting I don't know my way around this place?" Tokaki stopped, turning to send her a quizzical look. "Have a little faith, will you? My people are desert people. We've always worked through this land and I know it as well as I know my own village. We're not lost. We're navigating by the sun, that's all."

"It's a long way, however." Tatara reflected, casting Suzuno a concerned look. "Especially if you aren't acclimatised to Sairou's dry atmosphere. Suzuno-sama is a stranger here, Tokaki. She isn't used to the heat like we are. Maybe it would be better to travel by cover of darkness, when it's cooler. We could stop and rest for a while, and then…"

"We could, but thieves operate in this area at night." Tokaki responded. "And the closer we get to the mountains, the more likely it is we'll meet smugglers and whatever else lurks in a place crusted with gems and precious minerals. It's a risk either way. I know it's hot now, but at least we can clearly see for miles around us."

"Is that any use when all we can see is sand?" Suzuno asked plaintively. "Please can we stop — at least for a little while? I've never walked so far in my life."

"You really have had a sheltered life, haven't you?" Tokaki eyed her keenly. "No can do, Suzuno-chan. There's no cover here. You stop and all that will happen is the sun will slowly sap your strength out of you. You'll never continue — trust me on that. The desert is not your friend and it won't have any mercy for a rookie traveller. The path we're following will bring us to a village in the next couple of hours, in any case. If you can hang on till then, we'll take a break and barter for food."

"Two more hours?" Suzuno's eyes opened in dismay. "But… I don't know if I can even walk another two minutes! And I'm already out of water — I'll dehydrate whether I'm walking or sitting at this rate."

“Here.” Tatara fumbled at his belt, producing his water gourd as he held it out to her. “If you’re thirsty, you can take this.”

*“But that’s **your** ration.” Suzuno stared at him, and Tatara shrugged, spreading his hands.*

“I’m all right.” He said lightly. “I’m more acclimatised to this weather than you are, and I’m not at all affected by the heat at present. Drink it, Suzuno-sama. Your need is greater than mine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Tatara assured her. “Don’t look worried — I promise you, I’ll take no harm from it.”

He flexed his fingers.

“If the worst comes to the worst, I’ll try and split the ground with my plants and locate water that way.” He added. “We still have that option, so don’t fret.”

“You can do that?” Suzuno took a sip of the water, sending him a surprised look, and Tatara laughed.

“My power is to make anything grow, true enough.” He said amiably. “But it’s far more wide ranging than you think. I don’t just create pretty floral scenes, Suzuno-sama. I’m able to manipulate all plant life — make them grow, make them part, even make them stand up and fight on my behalf. Over the past few years I’ve had little to do but perfect my skills, since so many villages needed me to help save their harvests. Consequently I’ve become quite strong… and it is certainly not beyond my remit to use them to search for water. After all, the plants need that as much as we do to live.”

“I told you that the pretty boy here packed a punch if he wanted to.” Tokaki looked amused. “But we shouldn’t hang around here, Suzuno-chan. We’re prey for carrion crows and desert bandits if we stop. I promise, when we reach Shouki-mura we’ll take a break. The people there are usually friendly enough.”

“And the town of Eiroku is not far beyond.” Tatara reflected. “Where we might lodge in an inn for the night. I have brought coin, so it would not be difficult.”

“Eiroku is the heartland of the smuggling trade.” Tokaki looked doubtful. “We might not want to slip that deeply into dangerous territory. If Suzuno can’t manage a desert yet, she’ll have no chance against armed thugs. I think we’d be safer in the village.”

“You know this area better than me.” Tatara acknowledged. “If that’s

how you think we should play it, then I won't argue."

"Then we should move on." Tokaki decided. "Suzuno, do your best, okay? If the worst comes to the worst I can always carry you — but I have a feeling that's something you wouldn't want me to do."

"Carry… me?" Suzuno's eyes widened with alarm, and despite himself Tokaki chuckled.

"That's what I thought." He teased. "All right. Then walk, okay?"

"Hang on a minute." Suzuno cast him a suspicious look. "Tokaki, don't you have some power too? Doesn't your power let you shift people from one place to another… like when you first took me out of the storm? Why are we walking all the way across the desert if you could take us there in a split second?"

"Because I'm not as powerful as all that, idiot girl." Tokaki told her disparagingly. "I can transfer myself, and maybe one other person, a short way. But I've never tried to take it beyond a certain distance, and certainly I've not tried to move three people in one go. We're travelling quite a way, after all. And though I've been to the Kanin mountains and I know the desert well enough to navigate it, I wouldn't like to think what would happen if I tried to push my magic too far."

"Then what use is it?" Suzuno demanded, and Tatara put a gentle hand on her shoulders.

"Until the Miko comes, the power of each Seishi waxes and wanes." He said gently. "I've read about Genbu's people and the way in which they honed their strength to answer the Miko's call. Tokaki and I have only just met you, and though I have used my power fairly often to support local villages, it has taken time to manifest even at the level it currently is. Tokaki has had even less reason to use his abilities. Therefore, as yet, they're just beginning to develop. You should not be too harsh on him — without a Miko, after all, a Seishi has no purpose."

"That's a bit fatalistic, but I guess it's right." Tokaki agreed. "I don't know about no purpose, Kasaru — but it's for sure that I've barely used my skills till now. And in the last couple of days I've used them two or three times. To tell you the truth, it's tiring. Especially trying to keep up with a girl from another world who has no idea what to expect in this place. That's a full time job in itself — babysitting the Miko."

Suzuno sighed.

"I'm sorry." She said contritely. "I guess I didn't think about it like that. And at least you have some power… I don't have anything at all."

“You’d better had have, else this whole thing is pointless.” Tokaki told her bluntly, and Tatara smiled.

“She had the power to cross into this world.” He pointed out wisely. “Therefore she is the Miko. And the Miko’s power is a mysterious thing — but it exists, Suzuno-sama. You have it, deep inside of you. I guarantee it. Like Tokaki’s, it may take time to show itself. But I have no doubt that it’s there.”

“Do you really think so?” Suzuno looked doubtful, and Tatara nodded.

“I know so.” He agreed lightly. “So don’t look so worried. We are only beginning on this path, after all. There is much still to come.”

“And five more Seishi to track down.” Tokaki added. “Sairou’s a big country full of different tribes and peoples and the terrain isn’t visitor-friendly as a rule. It’s not going to be easy.”

“But if we can find this Taikyoku-zan place, surely then we’ll be able to ask this Taiitsukun person for help?” Suzuno asked, and Tatara nodded.

“I believe so.” He agreed. “So keep your chin up, Suzuno-sama. I’m sure we’ll be able to find it. After all, it said very specifically in the old documents that one day Taiitsukun would open the door to Byakko no Miko. And that means you must be able to get to this mountain somehow.”

“I hope so.” Suzuno sighed heavily. “It all seems so confusing.”

“At least you’re not crying and wailing about going home, though.” Tokaki reflected, shooting her an amused grin. “I was worried to begin with that you might be that kind of girl. But you seem tougher than you look, somehow. I’m glad about that. I don’t do well with tears.”

“I haven’t the water to waste on crying.” Suzuno said flatly. “In this hot, dry place I need all the water I have inside of me just to stay alive.”

She sighed.

“I don’t pretend I like it, any of this.” She admitted. “Especially because I know what happened to Takiko-neechan. But the truth is I haven’t a clue how to get back to my own world on my own. And I don’t want to be by myself in this strange place. So if this is a way I can find out how to get back, and if you both really are willing to protect me, then I suppose I haven’t a choice but to stick with you. Have I?”

“So we still have to work on your spirit to be the Miko.” Tokaki reflected. “But I suppose for now that’s good enough.”

He grinned.

“That way.” He added. “The dip in the land to the West indicates we’re

drawing closer to mountain territory. Over the next sand rise, you should be able to see the mountains faintly in the distance. They're still a distance away, of course — but at least you'll know where we're heading."

"That will help." Suzuno admitted. "All right. I'll try and keep going."

Tatara held out his hand to her, warmth glittering in his gentle violet eyes.

"I'll help you, if you want." He offered. "Once we reach the top of this rise it should be more or less downhill into Shouki-mura… and there will be shade there, at the very least."

Suzuno eyed him in surprise for a moment, then she nodded, accepting his hand with a grateful smile.

"Thank you." She responded. "When you say it like that, it doesn't seem so very hard."

"Hey! You'll hold ***his*** *hand but you're revolted at the idea of me carrying you?" Tokaki put his hands on his hips. "What kind of favouritism is that, Suzuno-chan? Which one of us saved you from the desert storm, huh?"*

"Tatara-san isn't the kind of man to take advantage." Suzuno shot back. "You saved my life and I'm glad you did — but Tatara-san doesn't say all the things you do about women. Girls don't like men who are like that, you know — you should think about what you say before you say it."

Tokaki stared at her, and Tatara laughed, a faintly embarrassed look crossing his features.

"I didn't mean to cause an argument." He observed. "I just thought that maybe it would help if I offered my assistance."

"Fine." Tokaki held up his hands. "Do whatever you like. It's only because you have such pretty looks, Tatara-kun. It makes you seem innocent and gentle."

"Perhaps he just isn't the kind of man who likes groping unsuspecting women." Suzuno said smartly, and Tatara shook his head.

"I've had little to do with them since I left court, and I was a young boy then." He reflected. "My sister aside, I suppose I don't really have any policy of how to deal with women at all."

"You and I really need to spend more time talking about that." Tokaki reflected. "You should've said something sooner, Kasaru. I'd have given you advice long before this."

"I don't think he needs ***your*** *kind of advice, Tokaki." Suzuno shook her*

head. “And didn’t you say you knew where you were leading us? Maybe you should concentrate on that instead of trying to make Tatara-san and I uncomfortable.”

“But it’s fun.” Tokaki winked at her. “And I can do both at once. Besides, you shouldn’t take it all so seriously. Like I said before, you’re Byakko no Miko. Noone’s going to do anything to you, so lighten up a little and learn to take a joke, huh? Your Father isn’t here now to worry about his daughter’s delicate sensibilities. Whether you’re in this world or your own, you’re going to have to learn how to speak to men sooner or later. Consider this your crash course — no extra charge.”

Suzuno shot him a dark look, and Tatara laughed.

“Travelling with you two is already more interesting than secluding myself at the monastery.” He admitted. “I think it might begin to be fun, having Byakko no Miko in Sairou.”

“That’s the village we’re heading for, over there.” Tokaki gestured to the west, where, in the shadow of the looming Kanin mountains, a cluster of green surrounded by the faint outlines of houses was just about visible. “Shouki-mura. It’s called that because of the small area of woodland it’s grown up around — I’m not sure what nomadic people originally settled there, but it’s become a thriving, settled village now. Many traders pass through this path and stop there on their way to Eiroku or the capital, so they’re also not as suspicious of outsiders as some small communities. If you can make it there, Suzuno-chan, I’m sure we’ll be able to find shelter.”

“It looks so far.” Suzuno bit her lip. “But at least I can see it. So I’ll try.”

*“Tokaki, wait a minute.” Tatara grasped his friend by the arm, an anxious look entering his violet eyes as he gazed out across the horizon. “I might be imagining things in this heat haze, especially with the dust that’s prone to rise from the desert during the day. But doesn’t that look like… **smoke**… to you?”*

“Smoke?” Tokaki’s expression immediately became serious, the humour dying from his golden eyes as he turned to glance at the distant village one more time. His brows knitted together, and he muttered a curse, clenching his fists as he slowly nodded his head.

“Shit, you’re right.” He murmured. “Do you think… fire?”

“Maybe.” Tatara’s voice suddenly seemed both tense and apprehensive. “In the village, or somewhere nearby. In this heat and with the dryness of the day the whole place will go… there’s not a cloud on the horizon and no chance of rain.”

"A fire in the village?" Suzuno paled. "But… people live there, right? You just said…"

"Yes. A lot of people, considering that it's only a village settlement." Tokaki said grimly. "And its dry enough to do exactly as Tatara said."

"Can't we do something?" Suzuno looked frightened. "There must be a way we can help! Tatara-san, didn't you say you can use your plant power to split through to find water underground? Maybe if you…"

"No good." Tokaki cut across her, shaking his head impatiently. "The whole place will be in ashes by the time we get there. I told you — it's at least another couple of hours to walk."

"It doesn't look that far!"

"It's an illusion caused by the haze." Tatara bit his lip. "Tokaki's right, Suzuno-sama. By the time we've walked there, the fire will have spread beyond our stopping it."

"But you said I was here to protect people!" Suzuno was close to tears now. "You said it — both of you! How can we protect the whole of Sairou if we can't even stop a fire in one village?!"

"Suzuno-chan, calm down." Tokaki ordered. "Hysterics isn't going to help anything."

"But surely…"

"There's no way we can get there quicker?" Tatara asked softly, and Tokaki frowned, a clouded look entering his gypsyish gold eyes as he considered his companion's question. At length he nodded, his gaze hardening as he sent another glance out towards the village.

"I'll use my power." He murmured. "And get us there more quickly."

"But you said that you couldn't… not so far as that!" Suzuno protested, and Tokaki shook his head.

"I don't know if I can." He admitted. "I don't know what might happen. But if I don't try, the village will burn. And you're right, Suzuno. We are here to help the people in Sairou. We have to try something… and that's the only way we're going to manage it."

He cast Tatara a glance.

"If I get us there, it will probably wipe me out." He added. "But I can't go there alone, since I can't split the ground or find any water. And if I take just you with me, we'd be leaving Suzuno alone… which isn't an option. So if I use all my magic and take the three of us, when we get there, it'll be over to you. You and your plants will have to find a way of drawing

water from the ground without setting yourself on fire — do you think you can handle that?"

"If you can, I will." Tatara agreed gravely. "If you're sure."

"Can you think of any other ideas?" Tokaki demanded, and slowly Tatara shook his head.

"Then grab onto me. Both of you." Tokaki held out his hands, and hesitantly Suzuno reached out for the nearest, feeling the hot dryness of his calloused skin against her own as Tatara followed suit. For once, Tokaki's usual humour was nowhere in evidence and he didn't even react, instead closing his eyes as he focused all his wits on carrying out the transfer. Suzuno felt a prickle of apprehension run up her spine, and she grasped his hand more tightly, inwardly willing her companion to find the strength somehow to make it work. As she did so, she felt a rush of something warm swell up inside of her, rushing through her heart and out across her body as a tingling sensation seemed to dart across her skin and into her companion's. Tokaki's eyes snapped open, as he cast her an incredulous look. However, before they could speak, there was a whoosh of air and light and Suzuno screwed her eyes up tightly, sure that any moment the wild sense of inertia would make her physically sick.

In a moment it had stopped, and as they fell heavily to the ground, Suzuno was aware of the acrid smell of smoke and the screams and yells of panicked villagers amid the crackling sound of burning timber. As Tatara had surmised, the fire had hit the village, and as she opened her eyes, she was aware of her tall, slender companion loosening the twisted threads that hung at his throat, pulling three or four objects loose which he then cast out across the ground. With a jolt Suzuno realised that her initial impression that these had been beads had been misguided — and that they were, in fact, seeds through which Tatara focused his strange power. At her side, Tokaki huddled in a ball, his breath shuddering through his body in heavy, exhausted gasps and instinctively Suzuno reached out her hand to him to support his trembling form.

"Are you all right?" She asked softly, and Tokaki turned to face her, a faint flicker of warmth in his tired golden eyes. Slowly he nodded.

"Thanks to you, I did it." He murmured, and Suzuno frowned, eying him in confusion.

*"Thanks to… **me**?"*

"Before we moved, I felt something surge up inside of me." Tokaki drew a deep breath into his lungs. "It was… Byakko. And it came from you."

Suzuno flushed, remembering the feeling that had encircled her own

heart, and she nodded.

"I felt something too." She admitted. "But I don't know how it happened. It just… did."

The ground juddered slightly beneath their feet at that moment, and as one they glanced up to see Tatara raise his hands, the thick lengths of green vine swirling out in all directions as relentlessly they drove their tendrils deep into the dusty earth. As each slender whip of green re-surfaced, water began to bubble and pool against the sand, and Tatara's brows drew together in concentration, his eyes narrowing as he spread his fingers in the direction of the village. As Suzuno watched, eyes wide with awe and disbelief, the long, stringy vines began to sprout large sprawling leaves in which they collected the water, surging towards the burning wood properties at the nearest end of the stricken village as they deposited the cool liquid into the heart of the flames. At first it was only one or two loads but, as Tatara's spell grew stronger, more and more lengths of vine sprouted from the scattered seeds as round after round of water began to drench the smouldering timbers.

Little by little the local villagers seemed to register what was going on and, as their panic became relief and joy they surged around their saviour, several of them calling him by name as they dropped to their knees before him.

"Tatara-san really is a local hero, isn't he?" Suzuno murmured softly, and Tokaki nodded.

"I told you." He responded. "His is a useful power to have when you live in a desert land."

"But that plants could put out a fire… like an army of villagers they could completely quash a blaze like that… I had no idea."

"Especially considering plant matter is prone to burning itself." Tokaki agreed. "But he isn't afraid of anything, somehow. Not when he wants to help someone in need. That's probably why his sister dumped him on the monastery like she did, to tell you the truth. He's always been quiet and he keeps to himself. But if he can make a difference, well, he always does."

He shrugged.

"I admire that about him." He added. "I guess that's why we became friends. I wanted to know the person who had come to help my village, but who had asked for no reward. And I've never regretted that I did. He's a pretty good ally to have."

Suzuno cast Tokaki a smile.

“You took a risk too, didn’t you?” she murmured. “Pushing your power to its limits to get us here. You really didn’t know if it would work or not, did you?”

“Hadn’t a clue.” Tokaki agreed casually. “But you were right. We’re Byakko’s. We have to take risks if we’re going to save Sairou. Don’t we?”

“I suppose so.” Suzuno nodded, glancing at her hands. “Whatever power it was that came from within me… whatever it was that helped you, I guess that’s the thing Tatara-san meant. The power I hadn’t known about, but what a Miko has inside of her. Which means I really must be Byakko no Miko. Mustn’t I?”

“Sometimes I wonder about your intelligence levels, kid.” Tokaki cast her a grin, sitting back on the ground as she sent him a reproachful look. “But you get there in the end. That’s what we’ve been telling you. Trust in us a little, huh?”

“I do.” Suzuno relented, sitting back as she gazed up at the clear brassy blue sky. “It’s strange, but I really do. It’s more than just not wanting to be alone in a strange land. I am homesick, but I feel like I’ve known you and Tatara-san all my life, somehow, and if I’m with you then I’ll be all right. I guess it’s another part of being the Miko — and today it meant we could work together.”

She reached down to rub her feet.

“And I don’t have to do any more walking today.” She added. “Since we’re in Shouki-mura now, aren’t we?”

“I suppose that’s true.” Tokaki acknowledged, scrambling to his feet and pulling her up with him. “Come on. Let’s rescue Tatara from his adoring fans — now seems as good a time as any to negotiate someplace to stay.”

“You’re friends of Tsuonie-sama’s?” A nearby young woman asked eagerly, and Tokaki turned, shooting her a winning smile as he nodded his head.

“Broken from the same branch, as it were.” He responded amiably, gesturing to his left cheek as Suzuno saw the glittering light of his character flicker briefly in and out of view. “Byakko’s servants at your service — I trust the village is safe?”

“Byakko’s chosen!” The woman’s eyes widened, and Suzuno sighed, shaking her head.

“Would you know of anywhere we might be able to spend a night?” She asked evenly, shooting Tokaki a warning look as she did so. “We’re travelling through this way and we had hoped to rest in your village, if the

chaos hasn't made it too much trouble."

"Thanks to Tsuonie-sama, only a couple of old buildings have fallen." The woman shook her head, grasping Suzuno by the hands as she did so. "And we would be glad to offer you a place to stay. In fact, it isn't much, but would you come to my family's home on the far side of the village? My father and I would be honoured to shelter and feed Byakko's people, especially after you saved our village."

"Then I guess it's settled." Tokaki nodded, bowing his head towards her. "Thank you."

"My name is Rou Haneki." The woman told him, returning the bow. "And you would be more than welcome, believe me."

"Hamu Ranva — although you can call me Tokaki, since Byakko chose to do so." Tokaki winked at her, causing a faint blush to surface in her cheeks. "Haneki is a pretty name — it suits you very well."

"Tokaki." Suzuno glared at him, then offered the confused Haneki an embarrassed smile.

"I'm sorry about him. He's tired." She said apologetically. "My name is Oosugi Suzuno. Pleased to meet you, Haneki-san."

"Tatara, this kind young lady has offered us shelter for the night, on account of your heroics." Tokaki raised his voice, and Tatara disentangled himself from the crowd of grateful villagers, stretching a hand in the direction of his discarded seeds as one by one they flew up into his waiting grip. Suzuno stared at him for a moment, and he offered her a smile, his violet eyes lighting up as he did so.

"I was happy to help." He responded. "And it brought us to our destination, so all's well in the end."

"Your magic is amazing, Tatara-san." Suzuno observed softly, and Tatara shook his head.

"Without Tokaki's shifting through space it would have been useless." He said evenly. "That was a team effort, Suzuno-sama. Not just me."

"Suzuno did her bit too." Tokaki added. "I don't know how and nor does she — but she gave me power and helped me make the transfer. I don't know if I could've done it on my own — so it really was a team effort."

"I suppose so." Tatara acknowledged. "Well, that's how it should be. We are, after all, a team."

"It really has started to feel that way." Suzuno agreed, glancing across

the village towards the small cluster of trees that had given the settlement its name several decades earlier. As she did so, she caught sight of a bird of prey as it swooped down into the branches, perching on the end of one as it spread its glinting, glorious wings in the desert sun.

Captivated, Suzuno took a step or two forward, pausing as the bird seemed to register her presence. Instead of flying away, however, it met her gaze straight on, and Suzuno's eyes widened as for a brief moment she was sure she saw something glitter deep within the bird's beautiful gem-like eyes.

Then, with a call to the heavens, the bird spread its wings once more, launching itself into the sky.

"*Suzuno-chan?" Tokaki's voice brought her back to the present and she turned, casting him a sheepish look.*

"*Are you all right?" Tokaki eyed her quizzically. "You were spacing out — do you need feeding that urgently?"*

"*No, it isn't that." Suzuno shook her head. "I just… did you see the beautiful bird just now? I swear it looked right at me — and I never saw a creature with eyes quite like that."*

"A bird?" Tatara frowned. "I'm afraid I wasn't watching. What kind of bird?"

"*Probably a desert vulture." Tokaki dismissed it with a flick of his hand, and Suzuno shook her head.*

"It wasn't a vulture." She protested. "It was beautiful! And it looked right at me."

"*Well, let's leave the bird-watching for another occasion, shall we?" Tokaki suggested. "You mightn't be hungry, Suzuno-chan, but I'm famished and I can't wait to try some of Haneki-san's cooking. After all, considering the effort that brought us here, don't you think we deserve to take a break?"*

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we will shortly be arriving in Morioka. Morioka is the next stop. Thank you."

The sound of the train announcer's voice pierced through Arina's senses like a wake-up alarm. She opened her eyes, staring around her blankly as she struggled to get her bearings. From somewhere deep in the back of her consciousness she still half-felt the bird's eyes on her and she swallowed hard, rubbing her temples as she sought to make sense of what had happened and where she was. As she did so, she caught sight of the scenery racing past the window, and she took a

deep breath as slowly the memories returned.

She was not Oosugi Suzuno, and she was not in the village in the midst of the desert after all. She was simply Kobayashi Arina, on a train to Morioka in search of information.

She sighed heavily, shutting Suzuno's notebook with a snap and sliding it into her bag along with her discarded fashion magazine. They were almost there, she realised dully. Within a short space of time she would be heading for the burial place of the woman to whom, by some strange twist, she had suddenly become so connected.

"It's crazy." She ruminated, as she gathered up her belonging neatly in her lap. "Whether it's a dream or something more, it seems so real when I'm there. Like when the magic surged through Suzuno-san's body, it was like it was *my* body it was flooding through. And those feelings of cameraderie for her companions — I felt them too. As if they were *my* allies, not just her allies. As if they belonged… with me."

She shook her head to clear it.

"I'll talk to Keisuke-san about all of this when I get home." She resolved, getting to her feet as the train began to slow. "And maybe, between us, we'll work out exactly what it all means!"

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

The sun was high in the cloud-speckled sky over Reikaku-zan as Hikari made her way up the mountain path that morning, humming a tune to herself as she scrambled over the familiar rocks and boulders towards the peak. It was not a long walk from the Eastern Village to the bandit base on the slopes of the blessed mountain, and though the path was broken and uneven in several places, she was now so accustomed to it that she barely even focused on finding her way.

It was funny, she reflected absently to herself, hitching her skirts up around her knees as she skipped across a thin trickle of water that, in the winter months, almost could be called a stream. When she had first arrived in Kounan, she had been terrified of the mountain and the bandits that lived there. But now it was a home from home in many ways and most weekends when she returned to the Eastern Village would be spent at least in part on the dark peak's rugged slopes.

"*Hiki*!"

A yell from the ledge above made her pause, turning her gaze skywards. A young woman stood precariously near the edge of the precipice, thick red hair flowing out around her face like a mane of fire as she raised her hand in an eager wave. Hikari grinned, acknowledging the gesture with a wave of her own, and with a deft leap that almost seemed to defy gravity, the newcomer leapt down from her perch, landing nimbly on the soft earth a few feet away from her friend.

"You're early this morning." She observed, her tones edged with the distinctive roll of a Southern mountain accent, as she stood up straight, dusting her clothes down casually as she did so. "Let me guess — Aidou-obasama was handing out the chores and you thought you'd escape before you got put on the rota?"

"No, nothing like that." Hikari dimpled, shaking her head. "But I did wake up early this morning, and so I thought I might as well walk this way, since I was up. I don't really mind when Aidou-san has chores in mind, to be honest — in Eiyou I'm treated like a Princess but there's something comforting about the normal way in which Aidou-san and Chichiri consider me a part of their family. I like it better that way — even if it means tying plants or helping with the cooking."

“Rather you than me.” Her companion said decidedly. “Well? You’re here, so that’s what matters. You’re staying — right? You ain’t runnin’ back to the village for lunch or anythin’ — we have you all day today, right?”

“You do.” Hikari assured her. “I know last week I was caught up in things and didn’t come to visit, so this week I’m all yours.”

She sighed.

“Tomorrow I’ll be riding back to Eiyou.” She added. “I feel way too busy considering that there are only so many days in each week.”

She paused, casting her companion a keen glance.

“Did Tasuki let you go out collecting toll then, yet? You said he was considering it — did he make up his mind?”

The redhead shrugged her shoulders.

“He’s still talking it out with Okaa-san.” She said with a sigh. “He doesn’t see a reason why I shouldn’t, but she has about fifty ideas about why it wouldn’t be safe. It’s shit really, Hiki. I’m a better sword fighter than most of the other bandits on the mountain an’ I ain’t either a coward or a weaklin’ when it comes to dangerous situations. I might be a girl, but that’s never stopped me bein’ the best I could be. I think she’s being overprotective — an’ I don’t like it.”

“Well, she is your mother.” Hikari pointed out. “And it is only just a year and a bit since Jin’s death, really. She’s probably afraid that something will happen to you.”

“She is, and she’s said so.” Her companion agreed. “But it don’t make it any easier.”

Hikari eyed her friend in amusement, taking in her appearance as she did so. Even at just sixteen, the feisty hothead she had met in the valley below less than two years earlier had somehow grown into a young woman now, she reflected, and looking at her she could understand Anzu’s concerns about her daughter’s safety. Although she had never taken time or care with her appearance, the girl had inherited all the fiery colouring of her father coupled with the attractive features of her mother, and even though she wore the very masculine, workmanlike garb of a mountain bandit, there was no concealing the fact that Tasuki’s cub was turning out to be extremely pretty. Yet there was something in the set of her jaw that told of steely resolve and determination, and her bronze eyes glittered with purpose as she surveyed her mountain domain. The thick waves of hair which, thirteen years earlier had inspired her nickname “Shishi” or “Lion”

only added to the striking nature of her demeanour, and yet Hikari knew that her friend was probably the one who least realised how easily her appearance would attract members of the opposite sex.

Still, Hikari reasoned, there was probably very little danger of Shishi being abducted or assaulted even by the most eager of male opponents. At her belt hung both the sword which, from an early age she had learnt to wield with passion and fire, and a curled black whip, indications of her keen involvement in her father's bandit hierarchy. Yet Shishi was far from being an ordinary bandit, for around her wrist curled a black-shell bracelet, deceptively unremarkable in its carving or appearance. Hikari's mind flitted briefly back to the moment when Shishi had unearthed this treasure, waking the mage spirit of Genbu in the process, and she smiled, knowing that even now the Northern mage known as Doryoku shared her knowledge and her skill and magic with her young, Southern-born host. It had been partly Doryoku's influence and partly the death of Shishi's adoptive elder brother Jin sixteen months earlier which had turned the naïve young bandit hopeful into a wily, resolute fighter, and yet, even though Jin would never be forgotten on the mountain, Hikari knew that the time of sadness had passed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Shishi demanded now. "What's so funny — spill!"

"Nothing really." Hikari shook her head. "I was just thinking about what you'd do if some guy tried to grab you, that's all."

Shishi snorted, amusement in her bronze gaze.

"He'd have a damn shock comin', that's for sure." She reflected. "He'd be hurtin' in a few places by the time I was done, lets put it that way."

She brushed her fingers against the hilt of her sword as if to emphasise her point.

"But Okaa-san worries too much about me." She added regretfully. "So I guess I'll have to hold out a little longer."

She linked her arm in her friend's, leading her forward along the stony track as they continued upwards towards the main base of the Reikaku-zan bandit tribe. Though thieves and rogues had found their place here, Reikaku-zan's driving purpose was the protection of the weaker, impoverished villages that were dotted around their base, and since their leader Genrou had also been blessed with the Suzaku sign for Tasuki, he had ensured that his people took their duties to the local folk very seriously indeed. Shishi had grown up with a strong

sense of like values, proud of the fact that her father's clan were superior to the vandals and troublemakers that haunted other slopes, and Hikari knew that of all mountains in Kounan, this was without doubt the best one on which to be stranded or in distress.

"The sun's come out today." Shishi reflected now, as they passed through a thick cluster of trees and beyond to a clearing where a row of white-stone, domed constructions stood in a neat, perfectly set out line. "Yesterday there was such a hell of a storm that we thought there'd be trees down — but it's quieted now, thank Suzaku. Papa was all ready to send people to the villages to check for damage, but nothing seems to have happened."

"The storm was violent." Hikari admitted. "Sort of heavy and nasty, in fact. I was worried I'd get caught in it — but fortunately the rain didn't come till I was safely at the farm. Still, there was water lying all over the place on my walk up. It's not hot enough to evaporate yet — I guess it's going to be a bit wet and clammy underfoot for a while."

"Probably." Shishi agreed. "But we've survived worse."

She paused, casting her companion a grin.

"It's dry inside, however." She said, gesturing to the nearest of the domed structures. "It's been a while since you came to see my brother, so I thought maybe today you'd like to pay him a visit."

"Jin?" Hikari looked startled, then she pinkened. "I guess it has been a while. I suppose I feel a bit guilty, coming to his tomb when I've got Aoi's ring hanging around my throat like I do. I feel like I'm cheating on him somehow — even though Jin and I never had a relationship and even though he never met Aoi at all."

"Idiot." Shishi grabbed Hikari firmly by the arm, pulling her towards the tomb as she carefully unlatched the door with her free hand. "You shouldn't feel that way. Of all people Jin'd have understood. He'd have wanted you to be happy, Hiki. You shouldn't feel bad about that."

"I suppose not." Hikari stepped hesitantly inside, her gaze flitting to the stone coffin that took up the central portion of the tiny chamber, even as Shishi began to light the torches that hung in sconces around the walls. "It's silly, you're right. And I should come here more often. Jin was my friend too, after all. I'm sorry, Shishi."

"It's not me you should apologise to. It's him." Shishi advised, settling herself against the stone bier and pulling her friend down beside her. "But he'll forgive you. You know that."

“You still come here a lot, don’t you?” Hikari eyed her friend curiously, and Shishi nodded.

“I do.” She admitted. “But not because I’m trying to hold onto him or anything like that. I know he’s gone and I’ve come to terms with it. It’s just nice, sometimes, to come here and feel closer to him in some way. It’s weird, I know — but even though his spirit probably isn’t around Reikaku-zan now Suzaku’s taken care of him, it still feels right to come.”

She sighed, leaning up against the cool stone.

“Plus it’s a good place to go for privacy sometimes.” She added ruefully. “And when Eiju’s on the mountain, that’s a good thing.”

“Eiju-kun is that much trouble?” Hikari looked surprised, and Shishi shook her head.

“No… he’s just keen to sword-fight with anyone he meets.” She responded wryly. “It’s a good thing, probably — but tiring after a while. I have other chores and duties to do here without running around after my cousin. And Maichu takes the brunt of it… God knows how he balances his mountain responsibilities with teaching that whelp. T’be honest I had no idea Maichu could be that patient — but I guess you live and learn.”

“Maichu makes a good bandit, doesn’t he.” Hikari reflected, and Shishi nodded.

“He does.” She agreed. “Better than I think I anticipated, actually. Soldiers and bandits aren’t often interchangeable, but Maichu listens when he’s told stuff an’ he works at doing the things he should to improve or adapt. So he’s fitted in all right. Sure, he’s an idiot when he drinks an’ he sometimes slips off the mountain to go visit a brothel or whatever in Souun. But I guess that’s bein’ a bandit for you. He’s settled fine.”

“He has a good teacher.” Hikari teased, and Shishi grimaced.

“I didn’t teach him anything about brothels nor drink.” She said indignantly. “What kind of bandit do you think I am? But men an’ alcohol have a fatal attraction for each other, so Okaa-san always says. An’ as for the other thing…”

She shrugged, rolling her eyes.

“Men are men.” She said categorically.

Hikari laughed, nodding her head.

“True enough.” She agreed. “Although I think if I found out Aoi had been visiting any city brothels on his travels I’d be taking something hard and whacking him with it. I don’t think I’d forgive him easily, no matter how apologetic he was.”

“Aoi ain’t the type to do that, though.” Shishi said wisely. “An’ besides, it’s different. You’re pretty much betrothed to him an’ all that shit. Maichu’s free an’ unattached. So I guess he can do what he likes.”

She grinned, a wicked twinkle lighting up her bronze eyes.

“Okaa-san did give him a warnin’ that any children he accidentally fathered in Souun through his antics’d be his to worry about an’ provide for, mind you.” She said impishly. “I think Okaa-san was thinkin’ about what happened to Jin with his Ma when she said it, t’be honest, an’ in some ways she’s taken Maichu under her wing a little, considerin’ all the shit he went through before he came to us.”

“I suppose she misses having a son around.” Hikari reflected, and Shishi nodded.

“Somethin’ like it, though it ain’t the same thing.” She agreed. “An’ I remember her givin’ Jin a like lecture the first time he ventured out of the mountain — though he didn’t need it, because he didn’t think like that and never bothered about girls till you came along. Still, her warnin’ took Maichu aback a bit. Seems he hadn’t figured that something like that *could* happen… he really is an idiot, sometimes.”

Hikari laughed appreciatively.

“Poor Maichu.” She reflected. “But doesn’t it bother you, if he does that? I mean, heading off to the city for whatever reason?”

“Should it?” Shishi looked startled, and Hikari shrugged.

“You tell me.” She replied. “You and he seem pretty close these days… are you sure it doesn’t bother you?”

Shishi’s eyes widened for a moment. Then she burst out laughing, shaking her head.

“Don’t be daft.” She said scornfully. “You’ve spent too long at the Emperor’s court, Hiki. Haven’t you been listenin’ to me? I ain’t interested in men, marriage or any of that love mush stuff. I leave that to you… it’s not my thing. And Maichu — you are kidding? Sure, I like him — he’s fun to hang with on the mountain, I guess, an’ he’s a good guy at the bottom of his stupidity. But anythin’ else? No way. I ain’t interested. I’m not that kind of girl.”

Hikari eyed her quizzically, and Shishi sighed.

“I mean it, Hiki.” She said warningly. “Don’t you dare say any of that shit to him, else he’ll be unbearable. It’s not that way — all right? Maichu’s my ally — my buddy on the mountain. But that’s all. Nowt else. Okay?”

“Whatever you say.” Hikari held up her hands. “I guess you know better than me, so if you say it’s like that, I guess I’ll have to believe you.”

She frowned, running her hand absently along the edge of Jin’s tomb.

“It’s strange.” She reflected. “Jin really was like Tasuki’s son, somehow, wasn’t he? Even though he wasn’t by blood — he still grew up and embraced those values. Now Maichu’s taking them on board, too. This mountain has an impact on people. It’s hard to explain, but it’s there.”

“Maybe it’s because of Hisei’s relic being buried deep within.” Shishi looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. “Or maybe it’s because Papa is Tasuki like he is. I don’t know, but you’re right. Reikaku-zan is unique.”

She shrugged, stretching her hands over her head.

“After all, Jin never knew who his Pa was, but he never bothered about it, either.” She added. “Even though he knew he was taken in and he remembered his Ma and stuff from before he came here. It was like he didn’t need to know, because this was where he belonged and that was that. He never even knew if Rou was his real name. He just accepted it and moved on.”

“That’s because he had a good family, I suppose, to rely on here.” Hikari decided. Shishi nodded.

“He did.” She agreed, a note of pride touching her tones.

“Did you ever wonder? Where he came from?”

“Funny you should say that.” Shishi looked rueful. “When I was five or six, I asked him somethin’ about his real Ma an’ Pa. It wasn’t like I was tryin’ to be mean or suggest that he didn’t belong. I was just curious, so I asked him where his family was, an’ what happened to them. He kinda looked at me for a minute, then he jus’ shrugged an’ said, ‘They’re with Suzaku somewhere.’. That was all he said, an’ for ages I thought it meant that his folks were like my Papa — only they’d gone searchin’ for the God an’ hadn’t come back to pick him up.”

She looked embarrassed.

“When I was eight or nine, I asked Papa when Jin’s folks would come to see him.” She remembered, toying idly with the edge of her belt as she did so. “An’ he told me they wouldn’t, because they were dead. Then I understood what he’d meant, about them bein’ with Suzaku. An’ I never asked him again. He was jus’ Jin an’ that was it. Lots of kids are abandoned an’ orphaned all the time, after all. He was just another one of them — a lucky one who had someone to fall back on.”

“That’s sort of sweet.” Hikari dimpled, and Shishi reddened, shrugging her shoulders.

“Maybe.” She acknowledged. “That or stupid, one or the other. But after that I never really bothered about it. Although…”

She trailed off, turning her body around so that she could look at the tomb properly, then she smiled.

“I don’t know who the man was who did it.” She said softly. “Whether he was a client of Jin’s Ma, or someone else… I don’t know and I’ll never know, now. But sometimes I wonder if it was *Suzaku* who was responsible more than anything. Because when he died, he did it for Suzaku’s purpose. And when he came back to help me when I was trapped in that circus, he had the glitter of red light around him like he was Suzaku’s own. Jin wasn’t a Seishi and he didn’t have any connections to any of Suzaku’s people. But even so, I do wonder. Seiryuu said that his soul was safe in Suzaku’s care. So I wonder if… that was where Jin came from all along. Suzaku. To help us out, when we needed him.”

“Shishi.” Hikari’s eyes opened wide with surprise at her companion’s sudden sobriety, and Shishi sighed, spreading her hands.

“Is that odd?” She asked. “I haven’t said it to Papa, or anyone else. But Jin was always so focused on this life on the mountain an’ he never strayed from any of the responsibilities of it, no matter what. He was always good to me, always respectful of Papa and Okaa-san. And he put himself out for Suzaku’s need. They say that when people come to this world from your world, they cause changes to happen. And I wonder if Jin was like that. Suzaku’s doing. That’s all.”

“That’s pretty deep.” Hikari gathered herself, shooting her friend a grin. “But his tomb does bear the crest of the Emperor, and that crest carries the Phoenix, doesn’t it? Who knows? Perhaps you’re right.”

She shrugged.

“Or stark raving nuts. Whichever fits best.”

“Hiki.” Shishi glared at her, then she relented, her lips twitching into a sheepish grin. “I know. It is kinda deep and out there to think of. But it had occurred to me. That’s why I like coming here. If it makes sense. I think that whatever his start in life, Jin came here to watch over people — you, me, and Kounan as a whole. So that’s the feeling I have, whenever I come here.”

“Two years ago you’d never have said something like that.” Hikari reflected, and Shishi shook her head.

“I know.” She admitted. “But a lot happened. And also, having Donee flitting around my thoughts from time to time has helped, too. I guess maybe I’m growin’ up some — well, you too, if you come to it. You’re seventeen. It won’t be long before you an’ Aoi are man and wife now, will it?”

“Suppose not.” Hikari flushed, nodding her head. “And Reizeitei-sama asked me this week to help him when he sends out the call for women for his harem — he wants me to act as his messenger to them when he can’t be so himself. I guess that is what it is — growing up and stuff. It happens more quickly in this world than in mine, but I’m starting to acclimatise to that.”

“You seem happier here than you did… like you’re used to it now.” Shishi observed, and Hikari nodded.

“I am.” She agreed. “Though I still need to find time to visit home. It’s probably not been very long in my own world, though — so I’ve still time to make sure my magic and everything else is secure before I do.”

She sighed.

“Although the more time that passes here, the more I wonder how big the age gap might get between me and people I knew before.” She admitted. “So maybe that’s another reason why I haven’t gone back. Although I miss people and want to see them, I don’t want it to be weird for them or for me if I’m aging a lot more quickly than them now. Chichiri said it would be awkward to visit often and now I understand what he means. So as yet I haven’t tried to go home at all. I suppose time will tell whether or not I will.”

“They’d probably like to see you, regardless.” Shishi pointed out, and Hikari nodded.

“I think so too.” She agreed. “I guess I’ll give it some more thought.”

“Well, it might be better you don’t leave Kounan all that soon,

anyhow." Shishi reflected absently, and Hikari frowned, shooting her friend a quizzical look in the flickering light of the flame.

"Shishi?"

"It's probably nothing." Shishi shrugged, dismissing it with a flick of her hands. "Just something in the air of late… I'm probably dreamin' it or somethin'. Maichu sure thinks so — he says I'm bein' vague an' strange when I start talkin' about prickles in the atmosphere or whatever else. But even so…"

"Prickles in the atmosphere?" Hikari echoed softly, and Shishi nodded, casting her companion a sidelong glance.

"Yes. Why? Have you… felt them too?"

"Chichiri and I both." Hikari rubbed her temples. "Especially last night — the storm was heavy but not just in a weather kind of way. He didn't want me to worry Aidou-san with it, and I suppose neither of us thought it would bother anyone else. After all, Chichiri's senses are far more spiritually active than Tasuki's, and I've only begun to sense vibes so much since I got to grips with Suzaku living inside of me. It didn't occur to us that anyone else would be affected."

"It ain't me so much as Do-nee who spotted it first." Shishi ran an absent finger over the black shell of her bracelet. "She said there was something in the air, and the more I've thought about it, the more I think she's right. It's an odd, disjointed kind of sensation — I don't know how else to explain it. But as though something got put in its wrong place or somethin' — is that what you're feelin' too?"

"Yes." Hikari agreed. "I guess it does make sense that Doryoku would feel it. I'd forgotten about that… since she doesn't come out of the bracelet that often, it's easy not to remember that she's there."

"For you, maybe." Shishi looked rueful. "Although t'be honest she doesn't stir as often as she did when we were travellin'. Just sometimes, when I ain't expectin' it, she jumps up an' flashes somethin' across my senses."

She sighed.

"What do you think it means?"

"No idea." Hikari admitted. "And Chichiri didn't seem to know, either. He said it was just a vague sense of something, but he couldn't define it. And nor can I. It just feels like… something's changed."

Shishi was silent for a moment, then she cast her friend a glance.

“Like something’s beginning?” She asked quietly, and Hikari bit her lip.

“Maybe.” She owned. “That’s more or less what Chichiri said, as well. That something was happening — something spiritual and the atmospheric change was the first clue.”

“But a clue to what?” Shishi looked apprehensive. “Somethin’ as big as what happened when you dropped in the middle of us? Somethin’ like that?”

“All the legends are done, though.” Hikari shook her head.

“But we thought that before you came, and look what happened.” Shishi pointed out. “I don’t know, Hiki. I jus’ have a weird feelin’ about this — that somethin’ big *is* comin’ and that when it does, nothin’s goin’ to be quite the same again.”

“So this is Hengei.”

Ouba pushed open the window of the inn chamber, feeling the cool breeze as it teased at her long dark hair, refreshing her after her long journey cooped up inside Sayo’s expertly driven carriage. “We’ve made good time for the first day travelling, haven’t we? I really didn’t think we’d get here by nightfall, but I suppose I should have more faith in Sayo’s knowledge of short-cuts through Sairou, shouldn’t I?”

“I doubt anyone wants a princess to be sleeping under the stars when there’s a city inn as an alternative.” Kinka lounged in the doorway, an amused look on her face. “Well, Hime? What now? Do you want to go stretch your legs and see something of your father’s kingdom? Or are you too tired to step outside into the city?”

“Step… out?” Ouba’s eyes widened. “Wouldn’t it be dangerous — if someone recognised me…?”

“Noone’s likely to, dressed in travel clothes like that.” Kinka shook her head impatiently. “And it’s not good for you to be confined in a carriage all day long without any exercise. Besides, how often do you get to see Sairou at grass roots level? You’ve barely ever left the palace and when you have it’s been on official business in state style. This isn’t quite the same kind of trip — we’re very much incognito and you should take the chance while you can. Think of it as saying farewell to Sairou, if you like… it would be a shame if you didn’t make the most of being here before we cross the southern border into Kounan.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Ouba looked pensive. “What about Sayo?

What does he have to say about your bright idea?"

"He told me that he's at your disposal, so if you want to take a turn round the city, he's happy to accompany." Kinka smiled. "To be honest, I think he's a bit worried about the journey taking its toll on you, Hime. You do look a little peaked and pale, so the fresh air will do you good. Crossing desert land is hot and dusty work, after all. And as cities go, Hengei isn't as bad as some. Besides, I think there's some kind of festival happening here at the moment. Wouldn't you like to see it for yourself?"

"Then you've convinced me." Ouba flashed her companion a smile. "Though Father and Nefuru-niisama would both throw up their hands in horror to think of me wandering the streets without an Imperial flotilla, it might be nice to have a taste of freedom before we journey on. All right, Kinka. We'll do as you say. If Sayo really doesn't mind accompanying us — let's go into the city."

She fastened her cloak neatly around her throat, pulling up the hood as she shot her companion a rueful smile.

"Just in case." She said lightly. "I don't get to visit many city festivals, but there's no point in taking the risk. Just because I haven't been to Hengei alone before doesn't mean noone here knows what the Princess Ouba looks like, after all."

Kinka grinned, pushing open the door further to allow her companion out into the hallway. At the end, their burly, good-natured travel companion was waiting, and at the sight of the Princess he bowed his head, offering her a smile.

Now in his middle forties, Sayo's broad build and battle-marked features could, at first glance, appear intimidating, but Ouba had known him her whole life, and knew all too well the kindness of heart that beat inside the bulky, warrior exterior. On account of their trip, he was robed in simple peasant blues and blacks as opposed to the usual glitter of Imperial armour, but it was impossible to conceal his fighting spirit and Ouba knew that anyone who saw him would quickly realise that this was someone who had spent much of his life in the midst of conflict. Trained with a sword and with his fists from an early age, even the loss of two fingers on his right hand in a practice fight as a young man had not kept him from becoming the most dependable fighter in Nefuru's retinue. He had simply adapted his style around his injury, rising through the ranks quickly and easily embracing the Crown Prince's wholehearted trust.

Though his well-muscled arms were marked with both the war

tattoos of his people, the Yuusha, and the scars he had taken in battle in his Prince's name, deep down there were probably few men in Nefuru's service as capable of empathy and understanding as Ji Sayo. Inwardly Ouba thanked her brother's wisdom in having released his most trusty man of arms to escort her on her long journey to her new home.

"So Kinka-dono has convinced you some fresh air would be beneficial, Hime-sama?" Sayo asked now, his tones lowered so as not to attract attention, and Ouba nodded.

"If you really think it's safe for me to go outside, then yes." She agreed. "I suppose once we get to Kutou there won't be much opportunity for me to slip out into the streets and see the world. So for once I think it would be fun. So long as it's all right with you — let's go."

"I'm easy, Hime-sama." Sayo assured her. "I gave your Lord Brother my word that I'd keep you safe, and you needn't worry about me breaking that vow. Besides, Hengei's not usually given to riots and the Spring Festival is an annual event worth seeing."

His smile widened.

"I may be biased." He admitted, as the trio made their way down the steps towards the front entrance of the inn. "I was a boy in Hengei, some thirty or more years ago — this is my home turf. I remember my Ma and Pa taking me to see the festival and the fireworks every year as a child — it has a very special place in my heart."

"Fireworks too?" Ouba's eyes lit up, and Kinka nodded.

"Seems that way." She agreed. "Sayo, if you've been to these things before, you'll know what it's all about, won't you? I've heard of Hengei's Shunsai, but this is the first time I'll ever have been here during it."

"As it sounds." Sayo said easily, pushing open the heavy front door and holding it for his two younger companions to pass through. "It's a celebration of the end of winter and the beginning of spring. It's in honour of Byakko and the hope for a blessed season and good start to the harvest. Plus, the people like to have an excuse for a party. The desert is dry and dour, after all, especially in the winter months. The city inhabitants like to counteract all of that by filling their city with colour and light… so the Shunsai was born."

They stepped out onto the pavement and Ouba gazed around her in

awe and fascination at the way the usually plain streets had been transformed into a fairyland of lanterns and coloured banners and ribbons, some stretched from building to building in a precarious, extravagant manner and others simply ribbon or rope in rainbow shades twisted together and wrapped around the door and window beams of the closely pressed together houses and shops. From every direction, locals dressed in similarly vivid festival colours lined the streets, and although for some the fabrics they wore were faded and rough at the hem, the joviality in their expressions and the lightness of their steps told the Princess that whatever their means, the festival was a time of joy for all of Hengei's population.

"Traditionally it ends with a feast." Sayo was still explaining, and Ouba glanced up, eying him curiously.

"A feast?" She repeated, and Sayo nodded.

"Provided by the family inside whose province Hengei falls." He agreed. "It's been that way for generations — at least fifty years, perhaps even a century. That's why everyone looks so happy. Even the poorest families in the city will get a good meal tonight."

"The family whose province…" Ouba frowned. "Hengei is on the Southern border, so that would be the Han-ke, wouldn't? Rouhei's people. Kinka's too, come to think of it."

"Yes." Kinka dimpled. "Rouhei-sama's oldest brother is the current lord here in the South."

"No wonder you're sure it's safe to come here." Ouba grinned. "I can't imagine any of Rouhei's family being lax enough to allow trouble in the streets of their cities."

"As you say, Hime." Sayo agreed. "The Han-ke have always had lands in the South of Sairou, and of all families they've also always had the closest links traditionally with the Emperor and the Imperial Court. For that reason, this area is generally well taken care of — both by the incumbent family and Royal favour. After all, the Han-ke are probably the wealthiest noble family at court these days."

"Probably, if they did recognise you, everyone would be excited about it rather than wanting to cause trouble." Kinka added. "You're their blessed flower of the Imperial Court, after all — Ouba-hime-sama."

Ouba pinkened, shaking her head as she pulled her hood further up over her head, shielding her face from view.

"It's better we don't test that assurance." She murmured. "And to

that end, neither of you should call me Hime this evening. If people were to realise, word may get back to Father. And it could reflect badly on you two as well as me if they thought this was an inappropriate thing to do en route to meet my future husband."

"Then what do you want us to call you?" Sayo stared at her. "Your Lord Brother would have my head if I relaxed my manners even a little in your presence."

"I suppose we could just use 'Ojousama'." Kinka said thoughtfully. "It;s not that far from Oujosama, but a lot less specific about you and your status as a daughter of Heiboutei-heika. Many ladies will be out on the town tonight, after all. We'd probably get away with that."

"Then Ojousama it is." Ouba looked relieved. "Thank you, Kinka. I don't want to cause anyone any trouble."

"Well, we won't be out here long enough to get involved in the feast or anything like that." Sayo said firmly. "With all those people eating and drinking their way through the Han-ke's supply of alcohol, it wouldn't be wise. But I don't see the problem with stopping to watch a couple of processions and maybe some of the stalls and events going on along the way."

"It's so much fresher outside at night somehow, almost as if we were by the sea and there was a breeze coming off the ocean." Ouba reflected, as they made their way slowly down the crowded streets, the Princess absorbing everything as they went.

"Well, this is the Southern border, but the sea is less than a hundred *ri* from Hengei." Sayo said with a grin. "And at this time of year, the winds carry across the land even as far as here."

"Really?" Ouba looked startled. "I suppose you're right. After all, Kounan has a coast, too. But when I think of sea I think of Western ports like Kaidou and Shifu. I never thought of Hengei as being anywhere near the sea."

"Sairou has a long coastline, all things considered… but sadly, even with all that water, there's no using it to bolster the harvest." Sayo said pensively. "Salt water kills plants — seems a cruel joke when its the heat of summer and people and plants are dying alike of dehydration and drought."

"Yes, I suppose so." Ouba became grave. "But Father does what he can — doesn't he?"

"Heiboutei-heika has always tried to take care of those loyal to his crown, yes." Sayo agreed. "So long as my memory goes back, too, it's

been that way. His father was as good a man as he, and your Lord Brother is from the same mould. The last couple of generations of Sairou's Imperial tree have been blessed — the aftermath of Byakko's divine summoning, no doubt."

"Byakko's summoning." Ouba turned to gaze up at the biggest banner hanging over the town celebrations, taking in the figure of the snarling tiger at its heart. "Did it really make that much of a difference, Sayo?"

"I wasn't here, Hi… Ojousama, so I couldn't say." Sayo looked amused, and Ouba blushed.

"You know what I mean." She objected. "I just wondered… if you knew."

She sighed, spreading her hands.

"I've studied it a lot, as part of my childhood education." She added. "But what's in the palace archives is the Imperial perspective. I just wondered what kind of impact it had on the ordinary people. Being here, seeing things like this… I know there's still poverty and famine and the crops sometimes fail. Sashi said that Father's will to help is probably the work of Byakko still protecting this land. But I don't understand why he didn't take all those things away when he came to bless us. That's all."

"You should be careful, Ojousama." Kinka said warningly. "That's fair close to heresy."

"I know." Ouba frowned. "And I don't mean it that way. I really don't. I just… don't understand. That's all. Why he didn't change everything."

"If he had done, Ojousama, what would be left for the people of Sairou to do?" Sayo asked wisely. "Satisfaction breeds complacency. Complacency breeds arrogance. Arrogance breeds war. You only have to look at the fighting history of our destination country to see that that's true. Of all the four lands, Kutou has undoubtedly been blessed through the ages with great wealth, good crops and climate, and the perfect balance of water and land for the people to thrive. Yet they are the last land to have been saved and the last to find peace. Byakko is wise — wiser than any mere humans are capable of being. He brought peace to this land. The rest is for the people to do themselves. With his guidance, doubtless — just as Sashi-sama told you. But even so… some of it is still down to the Sairou-jin."

A warm smile touched his lips.

“At least, that’s how I see it.” He added.

“I see.” Ouba chewed on her lip. “When you say it that way, I suppose I understand what you mean. That it would be too easy to just assume Byakko will give us everything and come to take it for granted. Or worse, even. I hadn’t looked at it like that, but you’re right. It must be that way.”

For a couple of hours the trio of travellers mingled among the stalls and displays, each one as fresh and exciting to the sheltered Ouba as the last, and at many a performer’s corner she had to be dragged away from men juggling cups or women leaping through hoops held at an impossible height. By now the moon was high in the Sairou sky, the stars sparkling brightly overhead, and Ouba took some comfort as she realised the storm clouds she had observed before had long since cleared from the sky.

A young girl ran across the path in front of them at that moment, a roughly fashioned kite clutched in her fingers as she called out to a boy waiting by one of the food stalls at the far side of the street. The boy greeted her warmly, and Ouba decided they were siblings, for both had the same dark hair and indigo eyes. For a moment a pang of homesickness touched her heart, as she thought of the older brother she had left behind. Then she got to grips with herself, forcing the thought away. Tonight was not the night for that kind of mooning, she told herself firmly. After all, if she had stayed in the capital, she would not be walking through the gaily decorated streets of a distant city, absorbing the magic of a southern Sairou festival without the restrictive presence of an imperial guard.

“H… Ojousama, I think they’re about to begin lighting fireworks in the square.” Kinka grabbed her arm at that moment, and Ouba pushed her musings aside, nodding her head.

“I’d like to see.” She said honestly. “Is it all right? Can we do that, before we head back to the inn?”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t.” Kinka cast Sayo a questioning look. “Is it all right with you, Sayo?”

“It’s been nigh on twenty five years at least since I last saw fireworks in Hengei.” Sayo said ruefully. “If you’re not tired, Ojousama, then I have no objections to us staying just to see that. After all, producing fireworks is one of Hengei’s chief trades, even now… you won’t find any better in Kutou.”

“That’s right.” Ouba remembered, as they made their way through the crowds to the centre of the square, the substantial Sayo ensuring

that none of the city's many visitors even came close to touching either his mistress or her travel companion. "Whenever Father has a celebration, he gets the fireworks from Hengei. I'd forgotten that."

"He usually asks Rouhei-sama to ride to inspect them personally." Kinka grinned. "Although firework production is not one of the Hanke's many talents, he trusts Rouhei-sama's opinion."

"And this is Han territory, so Rouhei is the ideal person to send… even if he is more often at Nefuru-niisama's side than Father's." Ouba said thoughtfully. "There are all kinds of things I'm considering for the first time tonight, you know. Things I hadn't connected together before… things that had just happened without me taking all that notice. It's interesting, in a strange way… how it all works."

"Turning theory into practice is a skill indeed." Sayo mused. "And I think they're about to begin. See, Ojousama. Those men in the centre, see how they're dressed? They're professionally employed by the Hanke to ensure the display goes off without a hitch. And the bamboo they have with them? They fill those with special powder and set them alight. With a prayer to Byakko, we'll see something special tonight. By the looks, they've gone to great trouble for just a few minutes of colour and light."

"I've only ever seen fireworks from the palace before." Ouba admitted. "It'll be exciting, seeing them close up like this."

"It might be noisy." Kinka warned, and Ouba shrugged.

"It;s my farewell to Sairou." She reminded her friend. "For once, it's all right. I don't mind."

She turned her gaze back to the two men, who, as Sayo had said, were busy preparing their art with the skill and efficiency of people long used to doing the job. Before long, there was the first explosive sound of thunder and a bright flash of light, and Ouba, who had near jumped out of her skin at the sound, found her breath caught by the dazzling spray of colour that suddenly lit up the pitch black sky. The Hengei experts had tinted each firework with a different dye, and as they were fired one by one, Ouba found herself forgetting the noise as she marvelled at the magic of the light show itself.

All too soon the colours faded and dulled, however, and with a sigh she glanced at her companions, knowing that her evening of fun was about over.

"You look disappointed, H… Ojousama." Sayo observed, and Ouba shook her head.

“No. I’m not.” She replied. “Just sad it’s finished. That’s all. You were right, Sayo. It’s something special.”

She cast a wistful glance back towards the crowd, seeing the two small children she had observed earlier, something long and thin clutched in each fat fist and her eyes widened.

“Sayo… Kinka. Those children. What are they holding?”

“More fireworks.” Sayo was the first to answer. “They’re childsplay really, Ojousama. They’re nothing like what we’ve just seen. Cheap street attractions — that’s all. You’ll see when they’re lit — they crackle and spark, but not much else. Still, it amuses the youngsters, so it’s all to the good in the end.”

He offered her a smile.

“And we should go back to the inn. It’s late, and we must travel on tomorrow.” He added.

“I know.” Ouba sighed. “I’m coming.”

As they crossed the square back towards the inn, however, Ouba heard a shriek from behind her, and she swung around, horror flooding her dark eyes as she registered the scene before her. The children who had minutes earlier been playing and laughing with their hand-held fireworks had somehow managed to stumble out in front of one of the travelling floats that had been meandering its way around the busy city streets, carrying performers who had acted out short scenes from Byakko’s divine legend. At the last minute, the man pedalling the float had managed to swerve away from the children, but in her alarm, the younger girl had tumbled onto the cobbles, loosing her grip on the sparkler as she did so, and it had tumbled against the fabric of the float’s many drapes. In the dry cool of the Sairou night air it had quickly taken light, and as performers and driver alike fled the growing conflagration, Ouba was aware of the girl still sitting on the ground, staring up at the fire with a dazed, struck look in her gaze. Blood covered the youngster’s leg, and without thinking, Ouba dove forward, forgetting for a moment in the excitement of the situation that she was a Princess en route to Kutou.

“Ouba-sama!” The distant sound of Sayo’s voice echoed faintly in her ears as Ouba hurried down at the terrified child’s side, dimly aware that the milling crowd of pedestrians were too scared of the growing fire to worry about saving one careless infant from her fate. Many had fled the scene to secure their own properties or stalls, and resolution washed through the Princess as she wrapped her arms around the frightened little girl, who, too scared to do anything for

herself, merely buried her head in her rescuer's fine clothing, sobbing pitifully for her mother. Something in the child's tears broke through Ouba's own haze and she bit her lip, swallowing hard as she suddenly realised what kind of a situation she had put herself in. As the lick of the flames began to creep ever closer, Ouba realised she was more or less trapped between the burning float and the hard brick wall of a nearby building, and despite his best attempts, nothing Sayo was doing seemed able to put out the fire. Water, as ever, was scarce in the busy city, and the fire was persistantly finding new targets to feed its hunger. In the festival-bound city, with so many hanging ribbons and banners, it was easy to see how the whole of Hengei could soon be alight, and Ouba felt fear curl up inside her heart as she wondered if she was about to die.

"Ouba-hime, what are you doing!" Discretion forgotten in her panic, Kinka hurried down at the Princess's side, even as Sayo began to muscle through the panicked crowd, yelling for them to calm down and bring water before the whole city set alight. "Are you trying to get killed! It's dry as a tinder — you'll get burnt!"

"I couldn't leave her." Ouba raised plaintive eyes to her companion. "She's just a child. She was just having fun. I couldn't not help her."

Kinka eyed her for a moment, an unreadable expression on her features. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

"We have to get past the fire." She said frankly, and Ouba found herself glad of her friend's pragmatism as it staved her own rising panic. "Quickly! We don't have much time. Bring the child too, if you can carry her — we need to move now. Any hesitation and we won't make it."

"You shouldn't have come through after me." Ouba murmured, and Kinka snorted.

"What would my life be worth if I abandoned you to save it?" She demanded. "Don't be foolish. I wouldn't let you die. Now come on. There's no time to argue. We have to…"

The rest of Kinka's sentence was drowned out by a sudden creak and crash, as one of the poles erected for the festival succumbed to the spreading flame, falling across their escape path, and Ouba let out a yell, instinctively shuffling back against the wall as she held the child protectively to her chest. The young girl had long since lost consciousness from fear and pain, and Ouba felt that she might soon go the same way, for the smoke was beginning to thicken and she was finding it hard to see her way out.

“Hime!” Sayo’s yell brought her back to awareness, and she turned to see where her protector was, but although she could dimly make out his silhouette as he tried to pour earth on the flames, he was still too far from them to be able to effect a rescue. At her side, Kinka muttered a curse, and Ouba’s eyes widened, for she had never heard such language pass her companion’s lips before.

“Kinka?”

“Stay back.” Kinka had lost all pretence of formality now, forcibly pushing the Princess against the wall. “Keep her tight and stay back. I’ll look for an opening. If Sayo can create a pathway… we’ll have to move the moment I say, so be ready. All right? We’re not going to die here. Okay? Hold onto that. We’re not!”

Ouba closed her eyes, her grip on the injured child tightening as she found herself sending an inward prayer for help to the Tiger who watched over Sairou. Despite her earlier doubts and hesitations, the action was instinctive, for she had been raised with Byakko’s faith from the moment she was old enough to toddle into the temple and make an offering at her brother’s side, and now she clung onto that with all her might, hoping that somehow Kinka would manage to spy an opening, or that by some fluke Sayo’s efforts against wind and flame would pay off.

As these thoughts flitted through her panicked mind, there was a sudden hush, as though the entire atmosphere around them had stilled. For a moment all she could hear was the crackle of flames, then, little by little they too seemed to die back, and she was aware of a bevy of loud exclamations as suddenly the voices of the people were able to dominate the noise and chaos created by the fire.

Slowly she opened her eyes, blinking as she gazed around her in disbelief. The ground which had, minutes earlier been a flickering mass of red and gold flame was now simply coated in the smouldering black of charcoal, and her eyes widened as she struggled to find words to explain it even to herself. As she did so, she saw Kinka had crouched between her and the oncoming fire, and she cast her friend an emploring glance, her eyes demanding an explanation although her lips would not form the words.

As if sensing her look, Kinka turned, and Ouba once more saw the clouded, troubled expression in her friend’s eye.

“The fire stopped.” She said softly. “It’s all right now, Hime. We can go.”

“Wait…” Ouba held out her hands, resisting Kinka’s attempts to

pull her to her feet. “Wait. Kinka… how? Fire doesn’t just stop… did Sayo…?”

“It wasn’t me, Hime.” Sayo was at her side now, taking the unconscious youngster from her arms and casting the child a cursitory glance. “If I didn’t know better I’d say it was a blessing from the Tiger himself. The fire got within an inch or two of where you and Kinka-dono were huddled… and then, just like that, it died back. As if…”

“As if someone sucked all the air out of it.” Kinka said softly, and Sayo cast her a startled glance.

“I suppose so.” He ruminated. “Yes. That describes it all right. The wind did drop, come to think of it. But even so…”

“The wind…” Ouba murmured, struggling up, and almost falling against her friend as she did so. “I’m shaking all over. Why did I do something so crazy? But she’s so young, and I couldn’t…”

She cast Sayo a questioning look.

“Is she… okay?”

“Fainted, but yes. Her injury isn’t serious. Fear spoke for her, nothing more.” Sayo assured her, even as the small girl began to stir in his arms. “You were very brave, Hime — if reckless. Your brother would have had my head if anything had befallen you.”

“Mine too.” Kinka said grimly, and Ouba smiled sheepishly.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured contritely. “I suppose being out here with the atmosphere of the festival, I just got carried away.”

“Romi-chan!”

At that moment a woman ran forward, the young boy in tow, pausing and eying Sayo uncertainly as the young girl struggled into a sitting position, holding out her arms.

“Mama! Nii-chan!”

“This one belongs to you?” Sayo gently set the child on the ground and she stumbled across the cobbles, hugging her mother tightly as the woman scooped her up in her arms.

“Yes.” She said unsteadily, tears glittering in her dark eyes. “How can I ever thank you — *all* of you — for saving my daughter?”

“Thank Byakko.” Kinka said simply, and Ouba cast her companion a surprised look.

“Byakko?”

“It’s a miracle we’re alive. Any of us.” Kinka said evenly, not meeting the Princess’s gaze. “Byakko is the only one who can dish out miracles.”

“Byakko be blessed.” The woman murmured. “Romi-chan, it’s all right. You’re safe now. I promise. We’ll go home… you’re quite safe, so don’t cry.”

The girl turned, tears still glittering on her lashes as she met Ouba’s gaze.

“Thank you for saving me.” She said softly, her voice wavery, and despite herself, Ouba smiled.

“It’s all right.” She said lightly. “Just be more careful next time, won’t you?”

Romi nodded her head firmly, and Ouba’s smile widened.

“Then it’s fine.” She said gently. “And we should go back to our inn. Shouldn’t we, Sayo? I’m still shaking — I think I need a bath and bed, after that.”

“A good idea indeed.” Sayo sounded relieved. “Come on, Ojousama. Kinka-dono. Enough excitement for one evening.”

“Mm.” Kinka nodded her head, casting Ouba a troubled glance, and Ouba frowned, pursing her lips.

“Kinka-chan? Is something wrong?”

“No.” Kinka seemed to raise herself, shaking her head. “Just tired. As Sayo said — enough for one night. Let’s go.”

Writer’s note:
In case anyone is confused regarding the mode of addressing Ouba in the streets of Hengei:

***Hime/Hime-sama** refers to her as a Princess.*
***Oujosama** is another way of saying Princess.*
*Kinka makes it “**Ojousama**” which means the “honoured daughter” of any important, higher ranking family, thus concealing the specifics Ouba’s true position from any eavesdroppers.*

*A ‘**ri**’ (里) is an ancient Chinese (also Japanese) unit of measurement which equals approximately two and a half miles… ish.*

As for the fireworks, I’ve never been to ancient China, so I’m theorising on the fireworks based on the little information I have. If it’s wrong, gomen

:) I tried.

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

Well, so she was here.

Arina leant up against the outside wall of Morioka's central station, idly lighting a cigarette as she tried to get her bearings in the strange city. Although it was the first time she had ever been to Morioka, she was not usually given to getting herself lost, but the images she had seen on the train journey still penetrated her brain, making it difficult for her to concentrate on what was ahead.

"It gets more intense every time, yet I can't stop opening the book." She murmured, exhaling a cloud of smoke as she glanced ruefully down at her bag. "It's like a drug. Even now I want to take it out again, and that would be really risky. I don't know what happens to me when all that stuff is flooding through my head — but if I pass out or something in the midst of a strange city, I could be in real trouble."

She put her free hand to her chest, feeling the pounding of her heart against her ribcage as fragments of what she had seen once more flashed across her senses. Tatara, Tokaki, and the Miko — the girl, Suzuno. As she reflected on each of them in turn, she realised that even in a matter of a few days they had become familiar figures to her, and even as she stood there, she was able to picture in her mind's eye each of the two Seishi in detail, right down to the patterns on their strange, otherworld clothing.

"I wonder what kind of shit Hi-chan's wearing these days." She mused wryly. "This world of hers has a messed up sense of fashion, there's no doubt about that."

She put the cigarette to her lips once more, fumbling in her pockets for the map that she had roughly sketched out during her conversation with Keisuke on the telephone the night before. It was somewhat crumpled, but still legible enough to follow, and she scanned it carefully, glancing from it to each of the roads as she did so.

"Keisuke-san said left from the station, then straight on." She remembered. "So I guess left it is. All right, Arina. This is it. Time to meet this chick you've been having hallucinations about — at least, meet is probably the wrong word. But even so, it feels right to be here. And I should take flowers, if I'm going to visit a grave… I've been

prying into what might be her memories, so the least I can do is take something to honour her remains."

A shiver went down her spine as a chill wind whipped through her body and she put the map away, hugging her coat more tightly to her body as she set off in the direction Keisuke had indicated. She had not visited a cemetery in a long time, she realised. Not since her grandmother's death, in fact… and that had been when she had still been in elementary school. She had never thought to go back to visit it since, although her grandmother had always spoiled her with sweets and pocket money, and at that thought, a flash of guilt washed over her.

"But Gran lived in Kyouto. It's not just down the road." She reminded herself. "And this is different. Hell, this is as much to do with living people as dead ones. It's something like a pilgrimage — it all has to do with Hi-chan's leaving this world. I won't give up on her — no matter what. I won't accept that I'm never going to see her again."

She put out her cigarette, crossing the street as she caught sight of the gaily coloured bundles of flowers set out on display outside of a nearby newsagents. For a moment she paused, eying them pensively. As she did so, she remembered the surge of white energy that had engulfed Suzuno and Tokaki during the hallucination and her lips twitched into an amused smile.

"White, then." She decided. "Byakko no Miko should have white flowers… white like Byakko's magic."

"Okyaku-san, can I help?" The middle-aged shop manager stepped out onto the asphalt at that point, making her jump, and she glanced up at him, a rueful expression on her young features.

"I'm sorry. I think I was miles away." She owned. "I was looking at your flowers — do you have any bundles which are just white?"

"Just white, you say?" The man looked surprised. "Yes, inside I think there are some mono-colour arrangements. It has to be white, though, does it? Because there are some beautiful…"

"It has to be white." Arina said firmly. "No other colour will do, sir — I need it to be white."

"Well, if that's the case, please, follow me." The manager indicated for her to enter the shop and Arina did so, glancing around her at the many mingled displays.

"You're not local, are you?" As he led her towards the back of the

store, the man eyed her keenly, and Arina shook her head.

“It’s my first time in Morioka.” She admitted. “Does it show so much as that?”

“No — but you don’t seem like my normal customers.” The man grinned. “Hard to explain it, but there it is. And the white blooms are here. For a special occasion, is it?”

“Not exactly.” Arina responded, reaching out a tentative finger to touch the petal of a flower in the nearest bundle. “Yes, these look right. They’re white, just like I hoped they’d be. I’m actually going to the cemetery — that’s what they’re for.”

“I see.” The man’s expression became grave. “I’m sorry — I feel I’m prying into sensitive matters.”

“No… it’s not like that.” Arina hurried to reassure him. “This person isn’t kin to me. I guess you could say she’s an old… *old* acquaintance of some family friends, and since I was here, I wanted to pay my respects. She died a long time ago — before I was even born, so I never knew her. But it seems she was quite important, somehow. So I wanted to come.”

“I see.” The man quite clearly didn’t see, but he smiled. “Well, it’s nice to see a young’un taking their family connections so seriously.”

“This is the sort of connection that’s hard to ignore.” Arina reflected, then she paused, offering him a smile.

“Tenchou-san, have you always been in Morioka?”

The manager looked startled, nodding his head.

“Long as I can remember. Why?”

“Did you ever know Oosugi Suzuno-san?”

“Oosugi-san is it?” The manager pursed his lips. “Yes, I remember her. Though you’re going back some years now, you know. She must’ve passed… near enough twenty years back, or maybe more. Is that who you’ve come to see? If so, it’s an old acquaintance indeed.”

“Yes, I know.” Arina admitted. “My best friend’s uncle knew her, back then, and he’s been helping me a lot with my studies recently. It seems Oosugi-san was quite involved in ancient Chinese history, and so I felt some kind of connection to her. It’s my current interest too now, you see.”

“Ancient China, huh?” The manager’s eyes narrowed. “Now, that’s a funny thing you should mention.”

"A funny thing?"

"Yes." The manager nodded. "See, years back when I was just a young lad working on the shop floor, Oosugi-san used to come here regular as clockwork to pick up her papers. She'd often come with that young man who took care of her, as time went on — I forget his name, exactly. It was a long time ago, though I think he was involved in the religious life somehow. Anyway, I remember once that she asked my help to get a magazine down for her, and of course, I obliged. She was a kind lady, you see — the kind who never troubled anyone unless she needed it, and who was always happy to say thank you when it was called for. Anyhow, while she was looking at the magazine, she dropped something and it clattered under the unit. So I went down and fetched it up for her. She seemed quite distressed at the notion of losing it, as though it was something precious."

He smiled.

"It was a charm bracelet, or some such thing." He added. "But the only charm on it was the character for tree, set in silver with pearl. Mighty pretty, it was, glittering and shining in the light. I asked her about it, and she said it had been given her by special friends. She said that wood was the element of the Western Tiger, and started talking about the stars and some ancient Chinese astrology that connected to it. I didn't understand what she meant, but she seemed to have a genuine interest in it. Yet she also looked sad… as though it wasn't all as happy as she'd hoped it would be."

"A bracelet with a pendant that was the character for 'tree'." Arina looked thoughtful. "And she said it had something to do with ancient Chinese astrology?"

"Mm." The manager agreed. "Some kind of good luck charm, or blessing — I don't know. But I do remember that her late father — Oosugi Takao-sensei — now he'd been an expert in all kinds of ancient Chinese and Japanese history. So I took it as something she'd learnt from him. After all, he was well renowned in his field for a long time — one of Morioka's leading experts, in fact, on the history of this region alone."

"Oosugi… Takao-sensei." Arina repeated the name softly to herself, then, "What about Okuda Takiko-san? Didn't she live in Morioka too, once?"

"Ah, now you're going back before my time." The manager's eyes twinkled with humour. "Though I remember my Pa talking, when I was young, about the scandal of the Okuda case. You know she was

murdered, don't you? By her own father. He was an associate of Oosugi Takao-sensei's once, a professor in fact — but I don't remember Oosugi-san ever talking about that family. Cursed, perhaps… I don't know. But if you've heard the name Okuda Takiko, it must be because you've heard about Morioka's Taishou era scandal."

"Yes." Arina agreed. She crossed and uncrossed her fingers behind her back, then, "Because of reading Okuda-kyouju's work, I became interested in his life a little, too. But that he killed his own daughter…"

"Well, I don't know what the findings were." The man shrugged, scooping up the bundle of flowers and wrapping them more tightly with a thick pink ribbon. "There. That'll be five hundred yen, please. The whole thing was wrapped in mystery and since there was no trial, there was no chance for the public or the media to review the evidence in full. It was obvious Okuda-kyouju had killed the girl — he confessed as much in a half-brained letter he left Oosugi-sensei. But that was all, really. I suppose with geniuses it is a fine line between madness and brilliance. But thankfully Oosugi-sensei seems to have been of a different persuasion. Oosugi-san always talked with great fondness about both her father and her mother."

"Maybe when I've been to the cemetery, then, I'll go to the library here and see if I can find some of Oosugi-sensei's books." Arina decided. "Though they may have them in Tokyo, since I'm here…"

She dropped a handful of coins into the man's hand, offering him a smile.

"Thank you for your help." She added. "Hearing bits and pieces from people who knew them make people more real, somehow. And Oosugi Suzuno-san is real to me… even if she is someone I'll never be able to meet."

She sighed.

"Somehow I feel like I do know her, even though it's impossible." She added absently.

"Well, who knows." The man grinned. "Come to think of it, those flowers were her favourites, too. She always said white had a special meaning for her, and she'd always buy white flowers whenever she wanted to brighten up her home."

"I see." Arina pursed her lips, glancing down at the bundle in her hands. "Then I really did make the right choice. Thanks again — I

guess I'll head off and try and find my way to the cemetery from here."

"It's not far. Straight down the main street, first right then second left." The man told her. "The sky's somewhat grey over to the west, but if you're lucky it might hold off long enough for you to pay her a visit."

"Here's hoping!" Arina agreed. "With any luck this visit will at least make things a lot clearer in my mind."

And with this cryptic statement, she was gone.

"How is her Highness this morning?"

As Kinka pushed open the door of the inn's solar, Sayo's voice drew her attention and she frowned, turning to meet the soldier's concerned eyes with clouded ones of her own. It was early, she knew — barely after dawn — and as a result they were the only two of the inn's guests who had yet stirred from their rooms. Many of the inn's occupants were still sleeping off the effects of the Shunsai festival and feast, and Kinka found herself glad that, as yet, there was noone to overhear their conversations.

She sighed, coming to sit down in the seat opposite to him.

"Sleeping, still." She responded. "And I decided not to wake her. She's sleeping very deeply — and considering last night…"

"She didn't take harm from it, I hope?" Sayo looked anxious, and Kinka shook her head.

"No." She replied. "I don't think so. And her family are traditionally strong in body and mind, so I don't think she will suffer for it in the long run. But still, what happened last evening was a shock to her system and once we got back to the inn she was shaking like a leaf. I don't think we should try and travel on today, Sayo. I think we should remain here another twenty four hours, if you have no objections. I know it lengthens our journey, but we have very precious cargo and…"

"And she should not meet her prospective husband in a distressed state." Sayo rubbed his chin, considering his companion's words carefully. "Perhaps you are right. To be truthful, Kinka-dono, I had thought of raising the matter myself. Ouba-hime is, as you say, made of strong stuff. But she is still a Princess who has been fairly sheltered up to this point. Furthermore, last night…"

He sighed.

“Last night, I can’t explain.” He admitted. “All I can think is that it’s as you said — Byakko sent down some miracle to save his Princess from harm’s way. That fire was within inches of consuming both of you and the little girl. Then, as if it had hit a wall, it died away. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes…”

“Do you think that Ouba-hime saw it?” Kinka asked softly, and Sayo looked surprised.

“I don’t know.” He owned. “Would it matter, if she did?”

“I’m not sure.” Kinka pursed her lips. “Last night she asked me what happened… how the fire died. I got the impression she had her eyes closed and didn’t see any of what you… and for that matter, I… did. Which may be to the better, considering. Divine miracles and near misses are both things likely to excite someone already under a considerable amount of stress.”

Sayo’s expression became sober.

“True.” He agreed. “Are you asking me not to discuss it with her, then, Kinka-dono?”

“I… suppose maybe I am.” Kinka looked sheepish. “Would that trouble you? After all, the sooner she forgets about this the better. We have a long journey still ahead of us and although we made good time yesterday, I don’t want her to dwell on things that can’t be changed or easily explained.”

Sayo nodded.

“All right.” He agreed, and Kinka could see the relief in his eyes. “In truth, that suits me too. I’m a man who likes to explain what he sees and not to see what I can’t explain. The sooner last night’s incident is behind all of us, the better. Byakko’s protection or not… it’s unsettling. And I’d rather not dwell too much on it.”

He shrugged.

“Ouba-hime did say that Sashi-sama had given her a charm necklace cast with a protective ward, before she left.” He added. “Maybe it was the magic in that pendant which protected you all from the fire yesterday.”

“I’d forgotten Sashi-hime’s gift.” Kinka acknowledged. “I wonder if the Ueke clan’s magic *is* strong enough to truly protect Ouba-hime so completely.”

“Well, its as good an explanation as ever.” Sayo said frankly. “We’ll do as you suggest, Kinka-dono, and let the Princess sleep off her tiredness without worrying about travelling on today. I’ll speak to the innkeeper and arrange for us to remain another night. Money is not a problem, after all, so it should be easy enough to do. Tomorrow, with any luck, we’ll move forward towards the Southern border and into Kounan. And then Hengei and the Shunsai will be well behind us.”

He laughed ruefully, running his fingers through his thick, wavy crop of hair.

“It’s probably the first time I’ll ever be happy to leave Hengei behind.” He owned.

“I think we’ll all be glad of it, this time.” Kinka said with a sigh. She bit her lip, glancing down at her hands as she considered. Then,

“If that’s the case, I’ll go back to Ouba-hime’s chamber and wait for her to wake.” She decided. “Someone should be watching over her, even if the festival is over and the city is calming down. Will you arrange for breakfast for us all, Sayo? I don’t know how hungry I am, but I’ve no doubt the Princess will be after her long sleep.”

“You look tired yourself, Kinka-dono.” Sayo observed. “Maybe it would do you good to rest somewhat today, too.”

“Maybe.” Kinka acknowledged. “I didn’t sleep much last night, after everything.”

She pursed her lips.

“I’ll be all right, though.” She added. “So long as Ouba-hime is safe, that’s the most important thing.”

The first specks of rain were beginning to spatter onto the pavement as Arina reached the big cemetery gates, and pulling her jacket more tightly around her body, she hurried inside, making her way along the pathway as she racked her brains to remember what Keisuke had told her about finding Suzuno’s grave.

“Somewhere towards the back of the cemetery, with trees all around it, he said.” She mused. “Trees for Byakko no Miko, huh. Suzuno-san wore a bracelet with a tree pendant on it. And she was buried near trees. I guess Byakko’s legend really did hold on to her — right to the very end.”

On account of the weather, the cemetery was not busy, with only a few devoted mourners huddled over gravestones as they said silent

prayers or devotedly scrubbed clean the markers of their loved ones. Again Arina felt a pang of guilt at the fact she had never been to clean her grandmother's stone, even on the anniversary of the old woman's death.

In a little clearing to her right she saw a young man with two small girls, one of them clearly inconsolable as she clung to his hand, and Arina observed the very new, shiny stone that stood a few feet in front of them. It was too far away for her to read the lettering, yet instinctively she realised that this was a husband and his children saying their farewells to a mother and a wife, and for a moment she closed her eyes as emotions choked up inside of her. They were strangers, she knew that, and yet, something about their distress touched her. She had seen similar emotion, she knew, from the Sukunamis since Hikari had been taken to the other world and, although her friend had not died, she understood only too well the feeling of loneliness and loss that parting could cause.

"But if it was my mother, I wouldn't cry like that." She realised sadly, turning away from the tragedy stricken family as she made her way resolutely forwards. "And if it was me, she wouldn't, either. That's how it is, in the Kobayashi family. Noone would bother. Noone would care. Noone's been to Granny's tomb in a long time — not even Dad, when he was her eldest son and pride and joy. And it'll be the same with my parents… and probably for me. It's depressing, thinking about it. No wonder I don't come to cemeteries often. They mess with your head."

At the furthest end of the cemetery, a group of young men and women were huddled beneath the shelter of one of the seats, and as she drew closer, Arina was aware of one of them clutching a video camera, glaring up at the sky with a dark look in his eyes.

"We have to carry on with it, Yukihiro." She heard one of the other say. "Rain or not, we've a deadline. Or do you want to fail the whole semester?"

"I don't see why we had to do some stupid, boring report on some dead dude and his even deader daughter." Another muttered. "Now we're going to get drenched — and besides, who stakes out a cemetery to get footage? Seriously, not cool, you guys."

"Shut up already." The first one snapped back. "Okuda Takiko's murder was one of the big events in Morioka in the Taishou period. We're supposed to do a report on things that affected people in the last hundred years or so. I'd say Okuda-san's murder is on that list. Okuda Einosuke was a world famous Professor, after all. It was a huge

scandal — you should hear my Gran go on about it."

"We already have." The disgruntled Yukihiro told her frankly. "In great detail. And she couldn't tell us much about the kid being killed after all that. So they went to school together — but yeesh, your Gran is like, a hundred or something. Do you expect her to remember all that?"

Arina smothered a smile, inwardly glad that it was not Takiko's grave she had come to visit, for she had a feeling that an argument was about to break out. Still, from their position, she realised that she must not be too far from her destination, as Keisuke had told her that the Oosugi's family plot was not so very far from the Okuda one. With the image of the diary's worn covers still in her mind, Arina cast her gaze across the rows of stones for familiar looking kanji, and at length she let out an exclamation, hurrying towards the plinth of marble that clearly read "*Oosugi*". As she got there, however, she realised that it was not Suzuno's grave she was looking at, but that belonging to her father, Takao.

"I really need to read some of your books too, when I'm done here." She murmured, running her finger lightly along the edge of the stone. "I can probably learn something from you too, Takao-sensei. But for the time being, it's your daughter's grave I'm here to visit. So I guess we'll have to get to know each other better later. Right now I want to speak to Suzuno."

She moved further along the path, scanning the other stones as she did so, and at length she saw the one she wanted, carved in glittering white marble so as it stood out among its fellows. It was not a tall memorial, yet somehow it conveyed the beauty and purity that Arina had felt when the surge of Byakko's magic had seared through Suzuno's body, and she dropped to her knees before it, absently clearing the surface of the few stray leaves and stones that the elements had scattered there.

"Well, Suzuno-san." She murmured. "You haven't a clue who I am, but I'm beginning to know a lot about you. At least, I think I am… and I want to know a lot more."

Awkwardly she loosed the ribbon on the flowers, placing them neatly in the golden holder and removing the handful of dead blooms that still lingered there. Although they were shrivelled and past their best, they had clearly not been there more than a week or two at most, and from the cleanliness of the stone Arina realised that there were still people who cared enough about Oosugi Suzuno to come and keep her gravestone spotless.

Somehow this realisation made her glad, as she settled herself more comfortably before the final resting place of Byakko no Miko.

Now she was here, she mused, she had no idea what she should do or say, and for a moment she sat there in silence, her gaze scanning across the familiar name kanji. At the very bottom, almost concealed by stone chips, she caught sight of something engraved deep into the marker and she frowned, squinting at it more closely as she gently pushed the clutter aside. As she did so, her eyes widened with disbelief.

"A tiger." She murmured. "Someone carved a tiger on your gravestone, Suzuno-san. A proper tiger, not just the kanji for it, too. The Tiger of the West… does that mean that, when you died… someone knew? Someone knew who you were and where you'd been? Not Takao-sensei, since he died before you did. But who? Keisuke-san said you were old and you passed away when he and Kajiwara-san were visiting Morioka. But they wouldn't have had anything to do with this."

She sat back on her heels, regarding the carving thoughtfully. As she did so, she thought she caught a glitter of pearl white light in the beast's eyes, and she bit her lip, half-convinced that she had seen the tiger move his head, baring his fangs in a position of defiance.

"But that's crazy." She muttered. "Maybe that is what it is. Lately maybe I am going crazy. That would explain it all… gravestones don't move, dead people don't send messages through diaries and… shit, high school students don't usually skip cities to visit the graves of people who they never even met. Chieki's right. I really am getting weird."

She faltered for a moment, half convinced she should leave before she made a further fool of herself. The rain was coming down more heavily now, she realised, and she would do better to seek shelter — yet still she hesitated, unwilling to leave the place which, somehow, had become a site of pilgrimage in her mind.

With a sigh she unfastened her bag, pulling out the worn diary and glancing at it.

"This is why I wanted to come here, Suzuno-san." She admitted out loud, glancing from the book to the white stone once more, then sliding it back into her bag and out of the rain. "I don't know what magic this book has, or if it's all been delusion after all. I have no idea if the things I've seen really happened, or are only in my imagination. But if any bit of them is true, I… I'd like to know more about it. My

friend Hikari got taken to that world too, you see. Only, unlike you, she didn't get to come back. I know that bad things happened to your friend, Takiko-san… and that that was connected with her being Genbu no Miko. And even though Hikari has stopped being Seiryuu no Miko now, I worry about things happening to her, too. I guess maybe I'm grasping at straws… but I hoped that maybe coming here would make things clearer somehow."

She looked rueful.

"I hope that you aren't mad that I'm reading your stuff." She added. "I don't mean to invade your privacy… it just… happened like this."

At that moment, a prickle ran up her spine and she frowned, raising her gaze to the pathway beyond the trees which sheltered Suzuno's grave from the worst of the elements. For the briefest of instants, she locked gazes with a stranger, as a fleeting mirage of a girl appeared before her. She was young, perhaps Arina's own age or a little younger, with long pigtails of hair swinging each side of her face, her old-fashioned blue school clothing hazy and indistinct against the mottled colours of the cemetery grounds. Without a word she approached Arina, reaching out both hands to her and the schoolgirl saw the glitter of white light reflected in the apparition's pleading, troubled eyes. For a moment, nothing in the cemetery seemed to move. Then, as soon as she had come, the girl was gone, and Arina put a hand to her chest, unsure whether she had truly seen a ghost or whether or not it had simply been her imagination.

She turned back to the grave, ready to say her farewells, but as she did so, she saw the faintest glitter of white light beginning to spread across the bright surface of the stone. Mesmerised she watched as, little by little the dazzling marble became more and more radiant, obscuring the kanji for Suzuno's name completely in its unearthly glow. From across the cemetery, Arina was vaguely aware of the yell of one of the students she had observed earlier, but somehow he seemed very far away as, almost as if in a trance, she reached out her hand to touch the glimmering stone.

As she made contact with Suzuno's tomb, a violent jolt of energy seemed to flood through her body, searing through her nerves and clasping itself so tightly around her heart that for a moment Arina was sure that it would stop beating. The light continued to become brighter, and Arina was almost sure she could hear unfamiliar sounds mingled in with the background noise of Morioka's cemetery. The air around her body seemed to be growing ever colder, and distantly she thought she could hear the soft sound of snow falling against the

ground.

This was the last coherent thought she had as the light seared through her once more, dragging her deeper and deeper inside of itself and she surrendered her will to it, no longer able to fight against its lure as it sucked her in. As light became darkness, Arina was aware dimly of the unfamiliar call of a bird of prey echoing somewhere above her.

Then there was silence, as Arina's world turned to black.

Writer's Note:

For anyone wondering, I consider the first OVA null and void because of how much it contradicts other things (for example, Amiboshi's fate, the correct power of the Genbu Shichi Seishi, and the identity of Miaka's Shinzahou to name just three). So I've based my graveside meanderings on my own impulse, rather than on what's animated. Sorry if it annoys anyone, but I reeeally don't like that OVA…

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

“Otousama!”

Her breath coming in ragged gasps, the young girl hurried through the halls of the palace, anxiety and dread choking her heart as she pushed past both guards and ministers in her headlong flight. Oblivious to the calls of the people around her, she was aware of only one thing.

Her father was in trouble, and wherever he was, the world was cloaked in darkness.

“Jiene!Jiene, dammit, what are you doing!”

A sharp voice penetrated her daze as from somewhere a rough hand reached out to grab her, pulling her forcibly into a secluded alcove and giving her a firm shake. Tears blurring her vision, it took a while for the hysterical Jiene to register her companion, and to begin with she struggled against him, fighting tooth and nail to get away.

“Jiene, calm down! Calm down!” Her companion did not let her go, and slowly realisation sank into Jiene’s trembling body that this was not someone who intended her harm. On the contrary, his tones were laced with concern and she glanced up at him, at first unable to speak as she met his identical emerald eyes.

“This isn’t like you.” He murmured now, casting her a searching look as he reached up to brush away her falling tears. “Jiene, I’ve never seen you this way before. What’s happened? Why are you running through the hallways as if all of hell was after you?”

“Otousama…” Jiene murmured, swallowing hard as a sense of nausea and dizziness welled up inside of her. “Daiyu, please, let me go. I have to go! I have to go to Otousama!”

“Saihei-jisama?” Daiyu’s eyes widened with surprise. “I don’t understand… has he sent for you? Has something occurred? You’re incoherent — please, explain! Maybe I can help.”

Jiene drew a shuddering breath into her body, as even the air around her seemed to become heavy and thick with cloying evil.

“You can’t.” She whispered. “It’s too late. I can feel it inside of me, it’s too late. But I still have to… Otousama is…”

“Jiene…” Daiyu bit his lip, then, slowly, he drew her close to him, hugging her tightly as she buried her face in his shoulder.

“Tell me what you mean.” He said softly. “We may be only cousins, Jiene-chan, but you and I have always been close as siblings, and anything that affects you affects me too. Besides, if something has upset Saihei-jisama, then it will impact on the whole of the Han-ke. Surely you know that. Calm down and be rational. If there’s some kind of trouble Uncle has gotten himself into, I’m sure that Father can do something to help. The Han-keare honoured by the Emperor and not powerless by any means. There will be a solution, so tell me.”

Jiene bit her lip, tasting the saltiness of blood on her tongue.

“Otousama is dead.” She whispered, and all the colour drained out of Daiyu’s sharp features as he gazed at her in disbelief.

“Dead?” He repeated, incredulation in his tone, and Jiene nodded miserably, clutching a hand to her chest.

“I saw it.” She agreed, her tones wavering unsteadily. “Here. Inside of me. Like the other times. His body drenched in blood and his soul shrouded in darkness. Her darkness, Daiyu.That woman’s darkness.”

“That woman…” Daiyu looked stricken, and Jiene raised tragic emerald eyes to his.

“Makiko-kougou-sama.” She whispered. “The Empress of Sairou.”

“Jiene…”

*“I **saw** it.” Jiene shook her head, cutting across him as the flooding images pervading her senses threatened to drive her back to a pitch of hysteria. “The beginning of it, Daiyu, not the end.Otousama knew it… he tried to stop it. All this week he’s been withdrawn, and last night I understood why. I saw it, but too late. It’s too late to change it. He’s already gone.”*

She buried her head in her hands.

“Meishitei-heika will be next.” She murmured, her voice sounding strange and hollow to her ears. “He will sleep and not wake before death comes to claim him. The foreign born witch’s heresy will poison all of Sairou,Daiyu! Otousama is only the beginning.”

“Jiene, dammit, mind what you are saying!” Daiyu’s eyes widened with alarm and he reached across to clamp a rough hand over her mouth. “Have some care for where you are, and think before you speak! This is the heart of Sairou’s royal palace, and you are talking about our Emperor’s chosen Queen! A woman of royal blood who is by no means powerless or

helpless! You know and I know that politics between Sairou and Kutou rest on a knife edge and that Makiko-kougou-sama's presence here may be the only thing preventing an Eastern invasion. Think before you cast such wild allegations, for Byakko's sake."

"For Byakko's sake." Jiene pushed his arm away, glaring up at him with cold, half-crazed eyes as she reached up to brush her fingers against his throat. "Everything I say is for Byakko's sake, Daiyu — and so should it be for you, also! Otousama and Guihei-ojisama raised both of us to put the Tiger's faith first in our hearts, before pride and corruption and even before the material gain of the Han-ke and their position at court. You and I are chosen of Byakko, and you know it well as I do. This darkness is here. It will suffocate everything… and you tell me to shut up?! Otousama is ***dead****, Daiyu! Dead because of this heresy! And you expect me to do* ***nothing****?"*

"I expect you to curb your tongue if you want to preserve your life." Daiyu's expression darkened and Jiene took a step back from him, eying him in dismay.

"Daiyu?"

"Don't look at me that way, you stupid girl." Daiyu looked impatient. "Whatever duties being Han-ke has placed on me, and however reckless you are, I would never be the one to hurt you. But you are speaking indiscreetly and with nothing to prove your words but your own conviction! Given that…"

"Would Otousama's corpse be enough proof for you?" Jiene demanded coldly, and Daiyu sighed, reaching out a hand to take hers in his.

"I will investigate, if your words are true." He promised. "If Saihei-jisama has truly been slain, I will be his justice on behalf of the whole of the Han-ke. But even if you are struck by grief, Jiene, you must be careful what you say. War with Kutou can ill be afforded at this time. Curb your tongue and leave it to me. This is something in which you ***must not*** *interfere."*

Myoume's eyes snapped open, and she drew a sharp breath into her lungs as she struggled to get her bearings. As the vivid images fragmented and faded slowly from her mind, she began to make out the faint shapes of familiar objects in the darkness and she took another deep breath, steadying herself as she realised she was safe in her chamber and that it had been nothing more than a disturbing dream.

Her heart still pounded in her chest and, as a chill wind whipped through the room she shivered, pulling her robe around her shoulders as she got up to push the window closed. As she did so, moonlight

spilled through the gap in the drapes, illuminating the bed beyond and she turned, for a moment just watching the sleeping form of her husband lost so peacefully in his dreams.

A mixture of envy and affection washed through her and she sighed, sinking down onto the bed as she absently reached across to touch the thick silver hair that scattered out like a halo around him on the pillow. He did not stir, and Myoume eyed him ruefully.

“To think, once, you would have been the one whose sleep was disturbed by demons.” She murmured softly. “And I would have been the one to reassure you that what you saw was long buried in the past. This time it’s me, shaken by a dream that makes no sense and connects to nothing at all. Yet I can’t bring myself to wake you, when you’re sleeping so quietly as this.”

She leant back against the headboard, her hands idly going to her stomach as she felt the gentle, reassuring kick of her baby stirring inside of her.

“I’ve woken you too, have I?” She whispered. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I suppose my moving around unsettled you… or maybe you can see my dreams too, somehow.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“I wonder if that’s all it is?” She reflected. “The delusions of a woman on the brink of motherhood. Aishi-sensei has often said that pregnancy takes a physical toll on the body, and my senses are a little different from most people’s. Just because I no longer have the visions that Toroki once had doesn’t mean my powers are gone, after all. Dormant, perhaps, but not in all regards. I suppose funny dreams could simply be a relic of that blood inside of me… after all, it won’t be so very long now before the baby is here. No wonder I’m agitated… my body’s getting ready for something monumental and life-changing to happen.”

She closed her eyes, dragging the fragmented segments of her dream back together as she struggled to make sense of them.

“A girl of about Hikari’s age and a young man not much older.” She mused. “A murder, a heresy… an invasion by Kutou. All of that is irrational and stupid, surely? This is a time of peace. I’m within Kutou’s borders, and nothing could be further from Kintsusei-heika’s mind than invading Sairou. There’s no native Princesses here, let alone one called Makiko… and what was all of that about Byakko and the Han-ke? I must be muddling up all the events of recently into some warped delusion of my own. That’s the only clear explanation —

why else would I have seen all those things together in one random moment?"

She glanced back towards the window, her gaze automatically straying, as it so often did, towards the constellation for Toroki.

"That's all over now, though." She reminded herself. "I no longer have the Shinzahou. The world is no longer in danger. Amefuri is… no longer alive. And I no longer see pathways towards the future. I haven't even been able to discern whether this child is a son or a daughter, so clearly my powers of precognition have faded. That time is past. This is a new era. I'm Tou Myoume now, after all. Toroki is gone."

Even as these words crossed her mind, however, the sky outside the window seemed to haze and distort with iridescent white light and, for the briefest of instants Myoume thought she saw the snarling, clawing form of a ghostly tiger against the dark sky, his fangs and paws splashed with blood and a thick, black chain wound tightly around his body and throat. Despite herself, a cold prickle ran down her spine and she let out an exclamation, her sleeping husband forgotten as she hurried back towards the window.

The image was gone, however, and as she rested her hands on the sill she heard a faint, sleepy voice from the bed beyond.

"Myoume?"

"Hyoushin!"

Guilt flooding her senses, Myoume swung around, seeing her husband pulling himself into a sitting position, wiping the sleep from his eyes as he blinked at her in blurry confusion. His thick silver hair fell tousled and messy across his shoulders, and Myoume sighed, biting her lip.

"Are you all right?" Hyoushin sounded concerned, and Myoume nodded her head.

"I… I think so. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You look like you've seen a ghost." Hyoushin was quickly becoming alert and he held his hands out to her, gesturing for her to come and sit beside him on the bed once more. "If something is troubling you, Myoume, you know that you can tell me. After all, you have heard enough of my own ghosts in the past and I would not mind you returning the favour."

"A ghost, huh." Myoume sighed, sinking back down beside him and

absently leaning up against his body, comforted by the warmth of the soldier's solid form as he slipped an arm gently around her shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe it was a ghost. Or a hallucination. I'm not sure which, Hyoushin. That's the truth. It may just have been a dream."

"A dream?" Hyoushin looked surprised, and Myoume nodded.

"A combination of my physical situation and all the hype and excitement of late, preparing for this Western Princess's arrival." She agreed. "I think it's getting to me. I had the oddest dream and then I thought I saw… but I can't have done, so I must have imagined it. And I woke you."

She looked sheepish.

"I'm sorry."

"You need not apologise." Hyoushin shook his head. "What nature of dream disturbed you? You are not easily roused by trifles… and I thought that the images you saw as Toroki had long since desisted."

"They have." Myoume agreed. "This wasn't… you know, I don't think I even know what it was or wasn't. It seemed to involve two people… one called Jiene and the other— Daiyu, I think his name was. And someone had been killed. But they were dressed in strange clothing — actually, now I think of it, the kind of outfit that that I've only seen in pictures in history books of Sairou's past. And they were talking about things that didn't make sense. About a Princess called Makiko, who had come from Kutou. About heresy. And a family called the Han-ke. That's all."

"*Sairou's* past? I see." Hyoushin looked thoughtful, and Myoume cast him a glance.

"I didn't say it *was* Sairou's past. Only that they were *dressed* like it." She corrected. "The Han-ke are still a powerful noble family in Sairou, but I didn't understand the significance of them being in my dream. The girl was hysterical and babbled about heresy and Byakko, but none of it clicked coherently together. And this person, Makiko, was a Princess of Kutou. But there is no such person."

"*Could* there have been, in the past?" Hyoushin asked gently, and Myoume frowned.

"I see where you're going." She admitted. "And I suppose it's a possibility. But I studied Sairou's history somewhat in the village, Hyoushin. Father had a few books from the city and he taught me to read and write with those when I was small. And since I've been here I've read books in the palace library about Kutou and its own crusades

and campaigns. I don't remember a Princess called Makiko in any of those books… much less a Princess who went to Sairou and became Empress."

She spread her hands helplessly.

"The whole thing was a tangled mess and none of it meant anything to me." She added. "So most likely it was just a random dream. Imagination does odd thing… and so does having a baby. That's all it is, Hyoushin. I'm sure, so don't look so worried."

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, then,

"And what was it you saw?"

"Pardon me?"

"You began to say that you saw something, and then stopped."

"Oh." Myoume pinkened. "Because it sounded crazy. But I thought I saw Byakko in the Western sky. Stupid, isn't it? I went to check but he wasn't really there. I told you. I'm still half asleep."

"With a divine gift like yours, even dormant, do you really take such things so lightly?" Hyoushin asked softly, and Myoume frowned.

"Hyoushin, Toroki's duties have ended." She reminded him. "And you and I are about to start a family. Byakko's legend is over, and has been for over a hundred years. I'm the only living Seishi with a mark of the Tiger on my skin. And my power is not what it was, before. There's no other explanation. It's strange, but that's all. And you shouldn't worry about it."

Hyoushin pursed his lips, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then, at length, he nodded.

"All right." He said, though Myoume could hear the reserve in his tones. "But I want you to promise me, Myoume… if you have another, no matter how random, I want to know. Whatever the dream or however bizarre it seems. Even if there is no advice I can give… I want to know. For the sake and safety of our child as well as for the well-being and peace of mind of my wife, do not shut me out."

Myoume's eyes softened, and she reached across to squeeze his hand gently.

"You don't need to talk like that. I'm fine and so is the baby." She assured him. "But if it will make you happy, I'll promise. Thank you, Hyoushin. I feel better for talking to you."

There was rain on the horizon again.

Sukunami Miaka paused in her clearing of the dinner dishes to cast a glance out across the sky, a frown touching her features as she carefully transferred the already somewhat battered plates and bowls to the kitchen sink. There had been unsettled weather for the past few weeks, for it was barely out of winter, and yet something in this rain felt cloying and heavy and despite herself she could not shift the sensation.

“Hikari?” She murmured softly, though she knew that her daughter was far too far away to hear her. “I wonder what you’re doing now.”

“Miaka?” Taka pushed open the door, casting her a quizzical glance and at his evident concern, Miaka smiled, shaking her head.

“I’ve almost done here.” She said matter-of-factly. “Where’s Makoto? It’s his night to wash the dishes… don’t tell me he’s forgotten.”

“Probably not.” Taka pursed his lips. “More it’s a case of him shutting himself away in his bedroom to play with that computer Keisuke and Mayo gave him last birthday… again. I swear getting the internet was the biggest mistake we ever made, Miaka. We’ve lost one child to a world in a book and the other to cyberspace. What did we do wrong, do you think?”

“Beats me.” Miaka sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “I suppose Makkun is at that age where he doesn’t want to be sociable. And he has always shut himself away — he’s never been overly outgoing, not even when Hikari was… was still here. Still, though, you have a point. He spends far too much time playing on that thing. Maybe one of us should have a word with him. It can’t be good for his eyes… I’m sure his next optician’s appointment is probably going to mean he needs new glasses if he keeps on at this rate.”

“Well, antisocial fourteen year old or not, he still has chores to do.” Taka said frankly. “So I’ll go and tell him that so long as he’s a part of this household, he has to do his share.”

“Please.” Miaka nodded. She sighed heavily. “Who would’ve thought being a parent’d be so difficult, Taka? It’s impossible not to say that Hikari’s going has had an effect on all of us. Even now, a year and a half on — it’s like one day she’ll just walk back through the door as if she’s come home from school. Knowing that she won’t… is hard. And I wonder whether it’s even affected Makoto in some way, too. He’s never been an only child. Now it’s like he is one, all of a sudden… it must be hard for him to adjust, too.”

“He has noone to fight with.” Taka reflected. “But I suppose fighting can conceal a closer relationship between siblings.”

“Well, Keisuke-nii and I used to squabble sometimes.” Miaka acknowledged. “Perhaps that’s it. Makoto’s never been the kind of boy who’s talked openly about his feelings, after all.”

“Let’s start with the washing up and work from there.” Taka said ruefully, and Miaka nodded.

“All right.” She agreed. “And maybe I’ll ask Keisuke-nii’s advice, too. See if he has any ideas. After all, he understands as well as anyone what it’s like to have a loved one in that world.”

“Good idea.” Taka nodded. “All right. I’ll be back in a moment.”

He disappeared back into the hallway, and a couple of moments later, Miaka heard him knock on their son’s bedroom door.

“Makoto! It’s your night to do the dishes!”

“I’m busy!”

“Makoto! That wasn’t a request! This is your night, and you know that we have rules regarding chores in this house!”

“You never used to have rules about those things when Hikari was here!” Came the retort, and despite herself Miaka winced, setting down her dishcloth and heading into the hallway herself. The door of Makoto’s room was still closed, and Taka met her gaze with a troubled one of his own.

“Your sister has nothing to do with it.” He responded at length. “This is about you and your responsibilities. You’re fourteen, Makkun. You’re old enough to know that there are some things in life you have to do.”

“I told you, I’m busy!” Came the response, and Taka sighed, meeting Miaka’s gaze once more. Miaka spread her hands in a helpless shrug, and Taka took a deep breath, reaching for the handle of the door.

“If you have something you want to say, my boy, you’ll say it to my face.” He began, swinging the door open then stopping dead as he registered his son hurriedly sweeping something underneath the counter of his computer desk. Makoto had moved swiftly, but even so, it had clearly not been quick enough to fool his father, and Miaka bit her lip, sensing the tension rising between the two Sukunami family males as she stepped carefully into her son’s bedroom.

It had been this way a lot since Hikari had left, she reflected sadly. Taka and Makoto had rarely argued before that, but these days it was a far from uncommon occurance.

“I told you I was busy.” Makoto snapped defiantly now, pushing his glasses firmly back on his nose as he glared at both his parents through the glinting lenses. “I thought that you believed in respecting people’s privacy. Or does that only apply when it comes to talking about my sister and where she is, huh? Does it not count if it’s barging into my bedroom?”

“Makoto, that’s enough lip.” Taka said firmly, striding across the room towards the teenage boy as he held out his hands. “Give it to me.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do.” Taka’s lips thinned. “And lying about it isn’t going to help any. I saw it… so give it to me.”

Makoto’s eyes narrowed, but he made no attempt to move, sending his father a defiant look.

“Makkun, what is it?” Miaka asked softly. “Why are you so angry at your father — what are you hiding? All we wanted to do was have you do the dishes, because it’s your night. There’s no need for all this conflict.”

Makoto did not respond, and Taka sighed, grabbing him by the shoulders and forcibly pulling his chair away from the desk, revealing the thing that he had been clutching protectively in his left hand.

At the sight of it, Miaka gasped, her eyes widening with dismay.

“But that’s…”

“The ShijinTenchishou.” Taka grasped the book, plucking it out of the young boy’s grip as he sent his son a dark look. “Which belongs in the library, and not in this room.”

Makoto’s expression became rebellious, and Miaka bit her lip, hurrying down by his side.

“Why do you have that, Makkun?” She asked softly. “Why would you take a book like that from the library — I don’t understand.”

Makoto eyed her for a moment. Then he sighed, folding his arms.

“You both think I’m totally stupid.” He said frankly. “But I’m not. I know that Hikari isn’t down south. That that guy who came to take her with him wasn’t from Okinawa or wherever you said he was from.

I heard enough to know that it was more than that. So I did some digging around of my own, and found out about that. I heard Uncle Keisuke talking to Arina-san about it the other week, in the library, when I was doing research for one of my class assignments, and she was working on the desk. So I decided that I'd see what was so special about it."

"Makkun…" Miaka stared, and Taka snorted, dropping the book down on the desk unit with a thud.

"You mean that you stole it."

"It's not stealing." Makoto said stubbornly. "That book has my sister, doesn't it? Hikari's inside of it, somehow. That makes it more mine than the library's. I don't care what lies you tell me about Ri-san and why Hikari left with him. I saw her, before she left here, and I know that something happened to her. She had no shadow, for a start. And this book…"

He reached over to touch the leathery covers.

"It's all inside of it." He said softly. "Everything. Hikari was some Miko in some other world inside of this book. And you haven't told me anything about it, even though it means she's never coming home!"

There was an accusatory expression in his eyes, and at this, Taka's anger seemed to seep out of him as he sank down onto his son's bed.

"We didn't want to frighten you." He said slowly. "It was a lot to take in, and we didn't even know if you'd believe it."

"Arina-san knew about it." Makoto retorted. "Keisuke-ojisan and Mayo-obasan both do, too. Lots of people seem to be in on it. But not me. I read enough in that book to know what my sister did, and more, that it was because of things *you* both did before we were born. This involves my whole family, yet you left me out of it and I *hate* that!"

"Makkun." Miaka reached across to put an arm around the boy's shoulders, but Makoto shook her off.

"Don't." He said firmly. "If you don't like that I've got the book, you should have told me the truth from the start. And I'm not giving it back. I'm keeping it. Because Hikari is in it. Isn't she?"

Taka closed his eyes briefly, and Miaka saw the pained look cross his features. Then, at length, he nodded.

"Yes." He agreed slowly. "She is."

He scooped the book up, flipping it open, and glancing at the pages inside.

“The last time I looked at it, the pages were black.” He added. “But Makoto’s right. Now they tell a story. Hikari’s story. Seiryuu no Miko’s story, step by step. It’s all in here — right up to the end.”

He shut the volume with a snap.

“I’m sorry, Makkun.” He said, genuine regret in his tones. “We didn’t mean to hurt you by keeping it a secret.”

Makoto frowned, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t matter, now. She’s there and she isn’t coming back.” He said evenly. “And now Arina-san’s gone, too. So maybe in the end everyone will end up there.”

“Arina?” Miaka lookes confused, and Makoto nodded.

“Yes.” He said evenly. “Arina-san’s gone there, too. She’s gone to see Hikari-neesan, I guess.”

“Hang on a minute.” Taka held up his hands. “That’s really not possible, Makkun. Arina and Hikari were very close, and I know that Arina has been doing a lot of research on all of this of late. But even so…”

“I’m not making it up.” Makoto cut across him, reaching across to shift the mouse on his computer as the screen flared into life. “I told you, Dad, I’m not stupid.”

“What do you mean?” Miaka asked gently, and Makoto gestured to the computer, clicking on a couple of links as he loaded the national news webpage.

“There was something about this on the radio this afternoon.” He explained. “I was going to turn it off, but it sounded freaky so I listened. And then I looked up the report online. If dinner hadn’t got in the way…” At this juncture he paused to stare pointedly at his mother, “I would have downloaded the whole file earlier and watched it all. But the bit I did see was funky enough. You can say what you like about this world or that one, but obviously other people than Hikari can go there. It’s the only explanation… for this.”

He clicked another link as the PC loaded a video segment, and Miaka gazed at the screen, alarm growing with every moment as she watched the report begin to play.

“*Abducted by aliens or taken by angels? Police in Morioka are trying to*

get to the bottom of the strange disappearance of a teenage girl in their central cemetery early this morning. Witnesses claim that the girl, who has yet to be formally identified, was crouched before one of the graves at the rear of the cemetery when she was engulfed in a bright white light and pulled into the marble stone of the memorial. Unbelievable it may sound, but a group of students filming for a college project caught the event on video, sparking discussion as to whether or not this is a sign of some extra-terrestrial activity, actual proof of ghost activity or simply a bizarre and elaborate stunt gone wrong."

At that juncture, a wobbly, camcorder filmed image flashed onto the screen, and Miaka felt something cold grasp itself around her heart as she clearly made out Arina's kneeling form before the grave.

Then, in a moment, the whole scene was flooded with white light, and when it faded, the girl was gone.

Makoto paused the video, turning to glance triumphantly between his parents.

"You see?" he said bluntly. "Arina-san was sucked into a grave. What else could it have been but to do with this stupid book she's been bugging Uncle Keisuke so much about?"

Miaka swallowed hard.

"Taka…?" She murmured, and Taka bit his lip.

"Play it again, Makkun." He said softly. "Slowly, if you can. I want to see..what happens before the light."

Makoto shrugged, obediently doing as he was bidden, changing the playback speed to slow-motion as carefully he tracked back through the news report image.

"Stop it… there." Taka instructed, and Makoto did so, as his father peered more closely at the screen.

"What are you looking for, Taka-kun?" Miaka asked anxiously, and Taka frowned, shaking his head.

"I don't know." He admitted. "It's definitely Arina, that's for sure. But what in Suzaku's name…"

He trailed off, a startled look glittering in his eyes as he realised his choice of words, and Miaka swallowed hard, shaking her head.

"It's nothing to do with Suzaku." She whispered. "Suzaku's light is red. But when I first went into the book, Taka, it was like that. The red light engulfing me and dragging me to another place. I think… I

think Makoto's right. However it's possible for Arina to be swallowed up like that… there's only one place that she could have gone. Somehow, inside of the ShijinTenchishou."

"But the book hasn't changed." Makoto added, his earlier defiance fading somewhat in his eagerness to share his discovery. "I checked it as soon as I heard the report, but it still talks about Hikari. Arina-san isn't mentioned and nor is her being sucked into that woman's grave like that."

"That… woman?" Taka eyed him quizzically, and Makoto nodded.

"Some woman from Morioka." He agreed. "Arina-san is already pretty strange, so I guess her going to a cemetery at random is possible, but I guess I assumed it was someone in her family she was visiting when she got swallowed."

"What was the woman's name, Makkun?" Miaka asked quietly, and Makoto looked surprised.

"Name?"

"Yes. Can you remember the name of the person's grave that Arina disappeared into?"

"I think so." Makoto's brow furrowed, and he removed his glasses, absently wiping them on his sleeve as he considered. "Oosugi. Yes. That was it. Oosugi something. It didn't mean anything to me, though."

"Oosugi Suzuno." Taka paled, and Makoto stared, nodding his head.

"That was it." He agreed. "Why? Is this another secret you haven't told me?"

"I thought it might be." Miaka's voice shook. "No, Makkun, it's not like that. You've read the book now, right? You understand what it was that your sister did. What she was, in that world. And you know that I was there too… don't you? That she was Seiryuu no Miko, and I… I was Suzaku no Miko."

"And Dad and that Ri guy with one eye were part of your army or whatever, to fight against bad guys." Makoto nodded. "I know. So?"

"Don't talk about it like it's some kind of computer game." Taka snapped, and Makoto shrugged.

"S'what it sounds like to me." He said categorically. "That or some hopelessly shoujo manga. But who is this Oosugi Suzuno person? She

wasn't in the book… I don't think."

"Oosugi Suzuno was taken into the book before I was, and before Seiryuu and Suzaku were first raised by Yui and I." Miaka said unsteadily. "Almost a hundred years before, in fact. She was an old woman when we were fighting our battle for the ShijinTenchishou and she passed away whilst I was in the book world. But she was once inside that world, too. She was Byakko no Miko… the second Priestess to complete the legend and bring peace to one of the four lands."

"And Arina was at her grave. Engulfed in white light." Taka said softly. "The same light as Tokaki, Subaru and Tatara's stellar marks shone with. There has to be a connection."

"There has to be." Miaka scrambled to her feet. "I'm going to call Keisuke-nii. He's been working far more with Arina of late — maybe he'll be able to tell us what's going on."

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

“You’ve just got back and you’re going to be off again already?”

Hikari cast her companion a dismayed glance, looping her fingers absently in his as she met his seiran gaze with troubled hazel eyes. “Aoi-kun, I know you’re Kintsusei-heika’s representative at Kounan’s court, but even so, why does he need you quite so soon? You were only just in Seisen the other day, and now you’ve got to go to the Eastern capital?”

“Something like that.” Kaiga Aoiketsu sighed, running his fingers through his long dark hair and loosening the ties that held it neatly back from his face. “I’m sorry, Hikari. I didn’t plan it this way. But it’s unavoidable either way. You’ve heard, surely, that Kintsusei-heika is in the process of taking a wife? At least, the negotiations have been ongoing and now they’ve been finalised. Ouba-hime is already making her way East, so I’ve been told — and I received a message first thing this morning to the effect that Kintsusei-heika wants me to oversee her passage from Kounan to Kutou personally.”

“From Kounan to Kutou…” Hikari echoed. “I don’t understand. Reizeitei-sama did tell me about it, true enough — that Kintsusei-heika was going to marry a Princess from Sairou. But… she’s coming through Kounan? And you’re going to be escorting her — won’t it be dangerous? It’s been a long time since you even held a sword, after all.”

“I don’t think I’ve forgotten everything.” Aoiketsu looked rueful, holding his fiancee at arm’s length. “Though I’m hoping it won’t be that kind of escort. Since the West and the South are long-time allies, it makes sense for Ouba-hime to break her long journey here, at the Southern court in Eiyou. That’s where I come in. Since I have connections to both the Southern and the Eastern Emperors, the feeling seems to be that I’m perfectly placed to help the Princess make her trip to Kutou.”

He offered her a wry smile.

“The missive came from Hyoushin-sama, but it bore the Emperor’s seal.” He added. “They’re not really people I can argue with, even if you are missing my company.”

“I suppose not.” Hikari sighed, sinking down onto the wall of the palace grounds as she gazed up at him plaintively. “Just… is it always going to be like that? Your work dragging you all over the countryside? I know I’m not always at court either, but sometimes I feel I don’t see you from one week to the next. And though I always have Chichiri and company to go back to, and Shishi on the mountain — I’d like to see the man I’m going to marry. You know? It’s hard, sometimes.”

“For me, too.” Aoiketsu touched her gently on the nose, his seiran eyes softening as he settled himself down beside her. “So don’t look at me that way. No foreign wenches tempt me on my travels, you needn’t worry about that. And no matter how far I go, Hikari — this is where I’ll always come back to. So always be here waiting for me, all right? It’s the thing that helps me most to complete my duties with the utmost speed and efficiency… the knowledge that I’ve my own Princess waiting for me back in the South.”

Despite herself, Hikari flushed red, pushing his hand away playfully.

“Shut up.” She ordered. “You’re trying to embarrass me now.”

She sighed, smoothing her skirts absently beneath her fingers.

“I do understand, by the way.” She added. “Kintsusei-sama is your patron. Hyoushin-san your former Commander and the man you’ve always looked on as Father. And if this marriage is really so important as that, of course you have to be involved. I’m just selfish, sometimes. Everyone is so split up, this way. I miss people. Don’t you? I see Shishi on weekends only if she and I aren’t busy, and I haven’t seen Myoume in over a year.”

“I told you already, don’t make that face. It doesn’t suit you.” Aoiketsu scolded, shaking his head. “You have plenty to do here, surely? Considering how many people bow to you and call you *Hime*, you must be having some positive effect on the court.”

“Yeah — making all of Reizeitei-sama’s ministers plot how to make me marry him instead of you.” Hikari said flatly, and despite himself, Aoiketsu’s eyes widened.

“You are joking, I hope.” He said sharply, and at the tone in his voice, Hikari giggled, shaking her head.

“Actually, I’m not.” She responded. “But you needn’t look like that, Aoi-kun. I’m not looking to replace you, and Reizeitei-sama’s told me many times that he sees me as his sister but not as anything else.

We've become close, true enough — but no matter how much his council try, nothing will ever come of it."

"I suppose if I'm always away, I can't defend my claim on you quite so easily, can I?" Aoiketsu eyed her keenly, and Hikari gave him a little shove.

"You don't own me." She scolded. "I can and will make up my own mind as to who I love and who I want to marry. At the moment, that's you — so make sure you don't screw it up, all right? I'm not getting married until I turn eighteen, after all."

"You really have adjusted to being in this world, haven't you?" Aoiketsu reflected, and Hikari nodded.

"Had to." She said categorically. "Of course I still think about home a lot, too. But I'm not going to spend my whole life fretting about it, if it can't be changed. I made the decisions to use Suzaku's power and become Seiryuu no Miko — I chose to do that. So this is the consequence and I'll take it as it is. It's fine, Aoi. I'm okay here now. My riding is improving, and I don't really miss television or shopping at the mall as much as I thought I would. True, I do wish I could read and write a little easier, and I'm not really sure my studies are coming on that great. But aside from missing my family and my friends from Tokyo, I'm all right here. It's as Chichiri said. My body has adapted to being part of this world, and little by little, so have I."

She grinned.

"And I have you." She added. "When you're here."

"Don't play the guilt trip with me." Aoiketsu ordered. "You said you accepted it as my duty, so accept it already. Besides, I won't be going anywhere until the Princess arrives in Kounan and I expect she'll spend a couple of days at the court here to rest after such an arduous trip. Sairou is largely desert — you must remember that, right?"

"Vividly." Hikari grimaced. "I guess the poor girl will be drained… so I suppose, if her father and Reizeitei-sama are on friendly terms, it makes sense for her to rest a night or two here."

"It seemed a wise diplomatic move, to agree to Ouba-hime's coming to Kounan's court on her trip."

A fresh voice interrupted the conversation at that moment, and the couple turned to see the Emperor himself watching them, robed in his formal state dress as he cast a smile at each of them.

"I'm sorry. Interrupting the conversations of lovers is unforgivable,

but if the subject is politics, perhaps I can be forgiven." He said playfully, bowing his head.

"Heika." Aoiketsu sent him a startled glance, then he shrugged his shoulders. "As you say. Hikari and I were discussing Ouba-hime's coming to Kounan, and my duty to escort her beyond here to the East… that's all."

"Ah, yes. I also received a similar message from the Eastern court." Reizeitei inclined his head slightly in confirmation. "Although I had already thought to speak to you myself about her coming here. It seems that you are once again to be the glue between the cracks of two countries and their turbulent histories, Aoiketsu. As you came here, a man of Kutou to represent Kintsusei at my court, so now it seems the Eastern Emperor intends to use you in the same way. A man in my trust who is also in his trust… since Sairou and Kounan are allies, this must be a source of some comfort to the party from the West."

"That's pretty much what the message I received said." Aoiketsu agreed. "Though it means I'll be away again. I haven't been back to court directly in a while, so it will be good to see Hyoushin-sama again face to face. But I feel bad that I'm constantly darting to and from this place in the last few months. It's rough on Hikari."

"It's all right. I can take care of your fiancee in your absence." Reizeitei assured him. A doubtful look flickered into Aoiketsu's blue eyes, and at the sight of it, Reizeitei laughed, shaking his head.

"Ah. You have heard, then, that my council seek to make Hikari one of my Imperial harem — even my principal consort?"

"I just told him." Hikari agreed. "But I also told him it wasn't going to happen, Reizeitei-sama. He hasn't got anything to worry about."

"Whatever my council think, Hikari is correct." Reizeitei's golden eyes twinkled with humour. "She has become my sister, but she would never become my wife. And even if those feelings were different, she is promised in honour to another man — a man who I've come consider both an ally and a friend at my court. I am a Prince of true Kounan blood, and the son of Saihitei — the Emperor chosen by Suzaku to save the south. As such, do you think I'd even think of tainting my reputation or that of my kin by attempting to steal another man's belle?"

Aoiketsu reddened, and Reizeitei chuckled, mischief in his expression.

“I should like it if one day I could find that feeling for a woman, to the point of defending her against all other men.” He reflected pensively. “But you need have no fear of me, Aoi-kun. Hikari is very dear to me. As such, I will guard her against the interests of undeserving men — just as any Emperor might protect his blood sister from the same such enquiries.”

“I guess I know that, Heika.” Aoiketsu acknowledged, meeting Hikari’s glance as he did so. “I just… feel I am travelling a lot recently. I don’t want to impose on you, even though I worry about her whenever I’m not here. She might not be Seiryuu no Miko any more, but the connection we formed then hasn’t lessened any. Sometimes I feel my loyalties are stretched — that at times, I’d happily make my permanent home in the South, yet I can’t abandon the call or needs of my homeland, either. That was, after all, why I was spared and raised the way I was.”

“Kutou should be grateful to you for all you do for them here.” Reizeitei clapped a hand down on the other man’s shoulder. “The suspicion between our two lands has all but dissipated and trade has begun again, albeit slowly. Your Emperor and I have reached an accord on several matters and I have been able to safely send envoys into the East. You shouldn’t look so concerned. You’re letting noone down. And this latest duty is an honour, surely. Ouba-hime is a high-ranking Princess of Sairou’s court — the child of Heiboutei’s favoured consort Lady Rie and the full sister to Sairou’s Crown Prince Nefuru. To entrust her to you shows how much your Emperor has faith in you and your abilities.”

He cast Hikari a glance.

“Of course, I will need your help as well, when she comes.” He added. “You are, after all, the Emperor’s sister — are you not?”

“Me?” Hikari blinked. “I know I said I’d help you when it came to your harem, but Ouba-hime’s a real Princess, isn’t she? And I’m just the daughter of ordinary people from downtown Tokyo… won’t she be offended, if you throw her into my company?”

“In your world, you might have been that, but here you are Suzaku no Shinzahou.” Reizeitei reminded her. Mischief sparked once more across his expression.

“And besides, *I’m* a real Prince, aren’t I? Based on your reasoning, do you feel that *I’m* offended when I’m in your company?”

Hikari glared at him, putting her hands on her hips.

“Stop teasing me.” She ordered. “All right. I get it. I’m Suzaku no Shinzahou and I’ll help you entertain the Princess when she comes. But don’t be surprised if she doesn’t see it as you do, *Oniisama*. After all, she’s not from Kounan, and she won’t know.”

“*Oniisama*?” Aoiketsu stared from his fiancee to the Emperor, and Reizeitei grinned.

“Understood, imouto-san.” He said lightly, bowing his head in her direction. “Then it’s settled. When Ouba-hime enters Kounan’s palace, she will be in good company. You underestimate yourself, Hikari, or how quickly you’ve learnt to adapt to court. I doubt she’ll be anything but put at ease, if she’s in your company.”

“Maybe.” Hikari pursed her lips. “I don’t know.”

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“The truth is that there’s been a funny buzz in the air for the past few days.” She admitted. “And I thought it would fade when I came back to court, because I first picked it up in the village, on Chichiri’s farm. He felt it too, so I knew it wasn’t just my imagining. Like something was happening. Maybe it’s the coming of this foreign Princess — I don’t know. But maybe I’m a bit more twitchy than I usually am… and this is obviously important, so I don’t want to screw it up.”

“Then you’d probably better not choose the next few days to invite Shishi to court.” Aoiketsu looked amused. “There are a lot of the Council who really still don’t know how to handle her leaping over walls and perching on tree branches when she comes to see you.”

“That’s true.” Despite herself, Hikari laughed, nodding her head. “Though it is refreshing, when she does come. And I like seeing the looks she gets, when she does something unexpected. Everyone can be so stuffy and formal here at times, so she’s like a breath of fresh air.”

“I find her so as well.” Reizeitei admitted. “Though it vexes my advisors on occasion, when they hear her speak to me in bandit dialect and not in the most eloquent of court speech. Yet, on account of her being Tasuki’s daughter and the blood of a Celestial Warrior, they must bow to her and address her as Shishi-sama all the same. The effect is really quite entertaining — and I too look forward to her visits to the palace.”

His eyes narrowed impishly.

“Especially when a particularly boring bill is in the process of being argued out.” He added wryly. “She has a habit of not knocking before

she opens doors, and sometimes her timing is impeccable."

Aoiketsu chuckled.

"When you talk like that, Heika, you don't sound much like an Emperor." He reflected, and Reizeitei shook his head.

"I can be, when I need to be." He responded. "I am able to be the most austere and formal of Kings, if the ceremony demands it. But I am a man as well, and no older than you are, when it comes to it. To be able to enjoy jokes and games with people who see beyond my crown is something I value very much. That's why you can always entrust Hikari's safety to my care, Aoiketsu. Whilst she is at the palace, I promise, no harm will be allowed to come to her. She is a friend who I hold extremely dear, after all."

He offered Hikari a smile.

"Perhaps Aoi is right, though, that Shishi's presence at the palace during Ouba-hime's visit could easily be misconstrued." He acknowledged. "Although it is diplomatically beneficial, I fear I will have to be very much the Emperor when she is here, in order that no derogatory reports of my hospitality reach Western ears."

"I don't think Shishi'd *want* to come, if she knew you had a visitor like that." Hikari reflected.

"This feeling you had, Hikari — it's nothing bad, right?" Aoiketsu asked her quizzically, and Hikari shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know." She owned, her expression clouding slightly as she remembered the conversation with Shishi inside of Jin's tomb. "Shishi said that Doryoku had also got a vibe. But none of us can pinpoint anything about it. Just that there's something flitting around the atmosphere that feels… odd. As if it's in anticipation of something, but it's impossible to know what. So… that's all."

"If it was just you, I'd call it imagination." Reizeitei said thoughtfully. "Not that I doubt your judgement, but you have been studying very hard of late, Hikari-chan. And you are still fresh to your spiritual powers, even though Chichiri has taught you much about them in the past year. But if he — and Genbu's mage — both also picked up on it, there must be something. I will be on full alert and ensure that when Ouba-hime is here the security is perfect. If it has some relation to her coming, I will make sure no harm befalls her within Kounan's borders. Since this feeling and her coming seem to coincide, I won't ignore the possibilities of a connection."

"It's funny you say that, actually." Hikari admitted. "This morning,

when I woke up, I found I was thinking of Myoume and wondering how she was. It was an odd kind of feeling — not a premonition of danger or anything else. But just a wondering, as though her chi and mine brushed against one another somehow in the night. Maybe it's because her baby is due soon — I don't know. Or it might have been just a dream. And now you're talking about Ouba-hime and her travel party coming here. Myoume's from Sairou and so are these people. I wonder if that's a coincidence."

"What are you suggesting?" Aoiketsu stared at her, and Hikari shrugged helplessly.

"I don't even know myself." She confessed. "The two things just seemed… to click."

"I think that's reaching just a little bit." Reizeitei said gently. "Myoume-san is in the East, and it's logical you'd worry about her at this important time. But, even though she is one of Byakko's people, she has no connection to Ouba-hime. They may meet for the first time at Kutou's court… I think it unlikely they will have crossed paths before. I remember Myoume-san saying herself that she came from a small village in the desert near the mountains, whereas the Princess has spent much of her life at the Imperial court. There is no reason to link them together."

"No. Probably not." Hikari conceded. "Maybe it is just me. I have been dreaming about rare kanji and stroke count lately, so it's more than possible. But it doesn't hurt to send a message to her, at least — so she knows I'm thinking of her."

She dimpled.

"So, Aoi, when you go, you have to tell her my message in person." She added. "The baby may be born when you're there, even — and if so, I want a full report on everything."

"Everything?" Aoiketsu stared, then he looked sheepish. "Hikari-chan, I think there are a lot of things that the midwives and physicians at Kintsusei-sama's court would balk at me intruding in…"

"You know what I mean." Hikari scolded. "Myoume is my friend, after all. So anything there is to know, I want to know."

"Well, I'll do my best." Aoiketsu held up his hands in mock-surrender. "I can't guarantee it, but if the opportunity arises, I'll at least make sure she gets your message. After all, as you say, I'm sure she'll be glad you're thinking of her, even if you are so far apart!"

Where was she?

Arina opened her eyes, shielding her gaze against the sudden glare of white light that seemed to have engulfed her from all angles. Momentarily giddy and disorientated, she struggled to get her bearings, glancing all around her for something to explain where she was and how she had come to be in this strange, dazzling place. Try as she might, however, she could see no distinct landmarks, and as awareness gradually returned to her, a jolt of fear shot through her young body.

Not only were there no familiar landmarks surrounding her, but there were no landmarks at all.

Wherever she was was a place without either ground or sky, and though from somewhere deep in the distance she thought she could hear the harsh cry of a bird of prey, try as she might she could not see the creature or even its shadow as it wheeled overhead. Disorientated and confused, she sank down to her knees, spreading her hands out on what seemed to be a solid surface yet, no matter how hard she looked, she could not see where it began or how it supported her.

As the light began to flicker and fade to a more reasonable level, she felt a prickle run down her spine and her head jerked up as she met the gaze of another. The girl was somehow familiar, she reflected absently, with long tails of hair in braids down each side of her face and deep, expressive brown eyes that were clouded with consternation and worry. The stranger was dressed in odd, old-fashioned clothing which Arina knew to be an outdated form of school uniform, yet this person did not seem dated or aged in any way.

For a moment there was silence, then Arina was aware of a faint voice trickling like droplets of water through her thoughts.

Please, help them. Help them finish what we began.

Arina's eyes narrowed as she fixed the apparition before her with a scrutinous, searching look. Despite the clarity of the voice, the girl had not seemed to part her lips, and Arina almost thought she saw a glitter of something flickering around the other's aura. She bit her lip.

"Who are you!?" She demanded. "Who are you and why did you bring me to this place? What's going on?! Is this… is this a dream? Or is it… something else?"

The girl eyed her solemnly for a moment. Then she stretched out her hands, faint whiteish light glimmering from the tips. Little by little, flecks of opal energy began to form patterns across the stranger's

body, strengthening one by one as they glittered first across her cheek, then the tip of her finger, across the elbow of her left arm, her hand, her chest, at her throat… and finally, the faint edges of the final mark as it took shape across the girl's lower back.

As each grew more vivid, Arina suddenly realised that these were not simple clusters of light but that each of them spelled out a distinctive character in ancient, twisting kanji script. She drew breath sharply, realising with a sudden pang of fear that these were the same kind of marks as she had seen on both Tatara and Tokaki's bodies, and if she squinted, she could clearly make out the same lines and curves that she had seen tattooed on the white-haired Seishi's left cheekbone.

Yet this girl had seven of them, and they shone in a way which made Arina realise whatever this person was, she was not like either of the Celestial Warriors she had been hallucinating about.

"Answer my question." She demanded. "Who are you? What is this place? Why do I feel that I know you, dammit?!"

The answer is inside of you, Kobayashi Arina.

Again the answer seemed to echo within her head rather than come from the other's lips.

Please. Help them. Help them finish what we all began.

"I don't understand." Arina protested. "If this is a dream, it's not making any sense. And if it isn't… if it isn't… it's making even less sense! It's making…"

She faltered, her eyes widening in alarm as suddenly the pieces slipped into place, and she scrambled upright, stumbling forwards as she realised who the stranger was.

"*Oosugi*… san?" She whispered, and as the girl's lips twitched into a faint smile, Arina knew she was right.

"Shit." She muttered. "You really… you're Oosugi Suzuno-san, aren't you? You're Byakko no Miko. Those white marks are… something to do with summoning that God and doing whatever else it was you did to help Sairou all those years ago. Shit, but you're dead. So you're a ghost. You're a…"

Slowly the girl shook her head, and as Arina reached out a tentative hand to touch her companion's, she found her fingers collided with a smooth, cool surface, as though a barrier had been erected between the two of them.

"What the…" She murmured, and the girl bowed her head.

The answer is deep within your heart. There is nothing I can tell you that isn't already there. Knowing who I am is only a step away from knowing who you are… Kobayashi Arina.

"Will you at least talk some frigging sense?" Arina bashed her hands against the surface, frustration welling up through her as she felt tears spring into her dark eyes. "Dammit, where am I and what do you want me to do? How do you know my name, when you died years before I was even born?! I don't understand. I was in Morioka — wasn't I? And then… and now… where is this? What have you done to bring me here?"

Suzuno shook her head slowly, bringing her hands together as the white marks glimmered and faded from her body.

They're counting on you, Kobayashi Arina.

As those final words echoed through her thoughts, Suzuno's image seemed to fragment and dissipate into opal light, and she clenched her fists, banging them once more against the hard surface as she sank back to the ground.

"I don't understand what you mean!" She exclaimed. "What the hell do you want with me? Is it because I read your diary? Is this some kind of revenge for invading your privacy? Because I'm sorry, but I think abducting someone into some weird as hell place is worse than a bit of natural curiosity! Why have you dragged me into this half-ghost world of yours — I don't understand?!"

The cry of the eagle-like bird of prey shot through her senses once more and she started, swinging around as she caught sight of the creature for the first time, its wings glittering and glimmering from imaginary sunlight and a flare of snow white in its beady, piercing eyes. For a moment it circled around her head, shrieking and beating its wings as a sudden chill breeze whipped through Arina's curly dark hair, teasing it free from its band and causing it to fall loose and unfettered around her shoulders. At length it landed, perching on top of what Arina had initially thought was a barrier. As it did so, preening its beautiful plumage absently with its sharp golden beak, Arina realised that the object was not spectral at all, but a huge mirror framed in silver that spread out almost as far as she could see.

"So that girl… Suzuno-san… was… a *reflection*?" She wondered aloud, and at her words, the bird of prey cocked its head, eying her thoughtfully. Then it spread its wings, uttering a piercing cry. As it did so, Arina was reminded of the last vision she had had on the train to Morioka, and her hand flew to her mouth.

“Suzuno-san saw you too.” She whispered. “In the village that Tatara stopped from burning down. *You* were the one who brought me here, weren’t you? Not Suzuno-san. It was *you* — wasn’t it? You’re not a bird — not really. You’re something else. Aren’t you? Something from… something from the world that stole Hikari from me!”

The bird flicked the ends of its wings, its gaze boring into her for a moment.

“Tell me what you want, dammit. Tell me why you brought me here!”

You’ve already seen the answer.

This time the voice was different, and Arina stared at the bird, somehow knowing that it had come from this strange creature that was still eying her with a mixture of curiosity and resignation.
This mirror never lies. What you’ve seen is the truth. The rest is inside of you, Kobayashi Arina. What you do with it is up to you. You’ve taken the first step and made it this far. I cannot take you any further unless you want to go. Look ahead, not behind… then you will come to understand.

“Come to… understand?” Arina stared up at the bird hopelessly. “But… how can I do that if I don’t even know where I am?”

This place is known as Taikyoku-zan.

The bird arched its neck as if it took personal pride in this fact.

At present, all you see is mist, because your own heart is clouded and unsure. The rest is up to you, Kobayashi Arina. If you want to see clearly, you must find a way to move forward. You came here of your own volition — I did not bring you. Your heart did that. The spirit that swirls inside of you cried out for this world, to finish things left undone. Now it’s up to you whether you can accept responsibility, or reject it. I cannot guide you if you cannot guide yourself.

“Tai… kyoku… zan.” Arina murmured, even as the bird spread its wings and, with another ear-splitting shriek, it launched itself into the mists. “Wait! Dammit, *wait* — wasn’t Taikyoku-zan the place that Suzuno-san and the other two were looking for? So… so I really *have* somehow come into that world? Into *Hi-chan’s* world? But… how do I get out of here if I can’t see…? Come back, please! I can’t… I don’t know…”

She faltered, realising that she was once more alone and she sank back against the smooth surface of the mirror, burying her head in her hands.

“The reflection in the mirror was Oosugi Suzuno.” She murmured, tears glittering on her lashes. “Was she really there, or not at all? Either way, somehow I’ve ended up in a place I shouldn’t be. And I don’t know how to get from here to anywhere else.”

She reached out a hand to brush against the mirror again, as if by doing so somehow she could summon either the bird or the strange, ghost-like apparition back to her side. Though neither of them were entities she could explain, at that moment anything was better than being alone and trapped in a place she did not understand. Though the bird had told her it was Taikyoku-zan, try as she might she could not see anything beyond the heavy white-lit mist that seemed to stretch into eternity.

Suzuno had had white marks all over her body, she remembered, and the one on the girl’s cheek had definitely been the same as that she had seen on Tokaki’s cheek in the delusions caused by the diary. Although she had not been able to clearly see the mark on the back of the hand to confirm whether or not it matched Tatara’s, somehow she knew that it did.

“So the others belong to the other Seishi of Byakko.” She muttered. “Okay, so I can get that far. But it still doesn’t explain why I’m here or what I’m supposed to do about getting out of this place. I don’t know how to go home or, if I’m in that world, how to find Hikari. All I see is white… what am I meant to do? Keisuke-san’s map doesn’t stretch to the other side of reality!”

She pressed her finger-tips to the cool glass, feeling a strange prickle cross her skin as she peered desperately into the depths of the unusual mirror, hoping for some clue as to what she should do. As she did so, the glass seemed to darken at the edges, swirling and surging forward as if trying to engulf her completely. With an exclamation, Arina tried to pull her hands back but for some reason she was unable to move and, where her skin touched the glass came the sudden flare of dazzling white light. Arina screamed as it flowed into her, jerking through her senses, but even as it began to fade, she became aware of something else piercing her consciousness and as her resistance dropped she found herself once more surrounded by the unfamiliar scenery of the Sairou desert, as she submitted her own thoughts once again to Suzuno’s ancient memories.

So they had finally reached the Kanin mountains.

Suzuno gazed up in awe at the huge mass of rock formations that had swollen and cracked out of the dry desert soil, relentlessly rising one after another until they seemed to scrape the very sky under with they lay. The

range seemed to go on forever, though Tokaki had already told her that there was flat land on the other side of the peaks, and in the midst of the range one mountain in particular seemed to be taller and more imposing than the rest. Though they had passed several small mining settlements on their trek from Shouki-mura towards their destination, they had encountered few people, and Tokaki had explained that it was because most of the local people would be working by day and would not return home to their settlements until the sun began to set.

"Stay close to us and don't wander off, all right?"

Tokaki's voice broke through Suzuno's daze as she turned, meeting her companion's golden eyes with irritated dark ones of her own.

"I wasn't planning on it. I'm not six years old." She told him firmly. "You've said a hundred times since we left your village that smugglers operate in these parts and that we have to be careful. I've got the message."

"Tokaki's only concerned about your safety." Tatara chided her gently, offering her a smile. "There's only one Byakko no Miko, after all. And we don't want to lose her in the mountains before we find this Taikyoku-zan place."

"Do you really think it's somewhere here?" Suzuno asked pensively, turning her gaze back to the huge peaks that lay before them. "I mean, there are a lot of big mountains here, definitely. But… if there are smugglers and criminals round these parts, surely…"

"I don't know." Tokaki admitted. "But aside from those along the Northern border, they're the only mountains in Sairou. And it'll take us another few days to make it towards Hokkan, considering where we are now. We should at least check it out."

He grimaced.

"Besides, the North is overrun with Funoki." He added frankly. "And as soon as we cross into their territory, we'll be harassed into making offerings to Kitora, which we really can't afford to do right at the moment."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Suzuno stared at him. "Funoki? What are they? What's Kitora? I don't understand."

"Kitora is a relic which legend says contains a shard of Byakko's magic." Tatara explained evenly. "Its existence has never been wholly confirmed, but the northern tribes-people have a resolute faith in it and even deify it. Kitora is merely the name assigned to the relic itself, but to the northern Funoki, she's a Goddess in her own right, serving Byakko and protecting Sairou from harm through her benevolence."

“The North is generally quite rich in comparison to some of the other areas, so maybe it’s true.” Tokaki reflected. “Or maybe, more likely, it’s because they’ve got good at extracting offerings from travellers crossing into their territory.”

“I see.” Suzuno frowned. “So we won’t be going there…?”

“Not at the moment. Not till we’ve explored all other options.” Tokaki shook his head.

“I do have money, though, so if it comes to it, it’s not out of our remit.” Tatara pointed out.

“If they realise that, we’ll be in even more trouble.” Tokaki said frankly. “They’re not fools… and I vote we keep away as long as we can manage. Besides, Kumo-zan is known as a blessed mountain and the Kanin peaks are meant to have a connection to Byakko. I think this is more likely a place than somewhere bordering Genbu’s country.”

“Although it was recorded in papers relating to Genbu no Miko, so we can’t rule out the idea it might be on the border.” Tatara sighed. “It would be simpler if it was here, but we may yet have to go further North.”

“I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Tokaki said dismissively. “For now, we’re wasting time.”

He gestured ahead of him.

“The tunnels to the left are a short cut through arid and uneven land to the heart of the range.” He said earnestly. “Most of the mines are to the west of us, and so I don’t think we’ll be causing too much of a problem if we just take the traders’ passages through the worst of it. But I can’t speak for the smugglers, since I don’t know where their base is. It’s been a long time since I crossed this country, after all.”

“We’ll take our chances.” Suzuno saw Tatara finger the seeds at his throat. “If we have to fight, then we’ll fight.”

“Tatara-san?” Suzuno eyed him uncertainly, and her companion smiled, tucking a stray strand of dark brown hair behind his ear.

“To defend Byakko no Miko, we have to fight.” He responded. “And that’s what we’ll do, Suzuno — so don’t worry. We’ll protect you, no matter what’s in those caves.”

“Then we’re going in.” Tokaki grabbed Suzuno by the arm, pulling her towards the opening that was cleverly shadowed by an overhanging ledge, and Suzuno let out an exclamation, pulling her hand free.

“I can walk by myself!”

“I told you, no straying.” Came Tokaki’s unsympathetic response. “If you get lost, Suzuno-chan, in these passages…”

“I can follow you without needing to be dragged.” Suzuno said firmly, rubbing her wrist. “Lead the way.”

For a while the trio walked in silence, making their way carefully through the narrow, dark passages as they followed age-old tracks from one side of the mountain range to the middle. At intervals, clusters of glimmering stone glittered against the rock, creating enough light to guide any travellers making their way through, and Suzuno found she was both comforted and unnerved by their pretty, irridescent light. Beneath her feet, she was aware of the crunch of stones and sand, and as they rounded a corner, she thought she heard an animal scurry off into the blackness at their approach. She shivered, glad that she could not see clearly what was scuttling around the floor, for she had a feeling that, if she had’ve seen the creature, she would have not been able to carry on.

“A rat, a snake, whichever.” She muttered. “I can’t believe I’m really inside some deep dark cave like this, hunting some mythical place that might not even be here.”

“Something you want to share with the rest of us, Suzuno?” Tokaki turned, a quizzical look in his golden eyes, and Suzuno frowned, noticing the faint glitter of his Byakko mark on his cheek. She shook her head.

“No. Just talking to myself.” She retorted. “You just focus on getting us out of here as soon as possible.”

“There’s a widening in the passage up ahead, I think.” Tatara put in from behind her at that point, and Tokaki nodded.

“There should be, if I’ve counted right.” He said cheerfully. “Which means we’re halfway to where I want us to be. Good good. Let’s keep it up.”

Suzuno groaned, but obediently picked up her step, following her enigmatic companion forwards yet again. As Tatara had theorised, there was indeed a small chamber up ahead, the walls glittering with the same stone as had been interspersed along the passageway, and Suzuno found that they provided enough light for her to see more clearly her surroundings. As she did so, she let out an exclamation, eying the dust and dirt on her arms and clothing with dismay.

“I’m covered in soil!”

“Well, we are inside a mountain, so that’s not surprising.” Tokaki told her frankly. “Come on, huh? It’s the left hand exit. We’re almost there… so save your girly worries for another time. All right?”

Before Suzuno could retort, he was off again, and Tatara sent her a sympathetic look, holding out his hand to her.

"I'll help you, if you can't manage." He offered, and Suzuno hesitated, then shook her head.

"I'm fine." She assured him. "But thank you. At least one of you cares if I'm all right."

"He cares too." Tatara assured her. "He's just not very good at saying it in the right way."

He winked, and despite herself Suzuno smiled, nodding her head.

"I guess I know that." She admitted. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to complain."

"Then let's not let him get too far ahead." Tatara suggested. "If he says it's not far, he's probably right. He has a very keen sense of direction, for all his other faults."

With that he bent to follow Tokaki into the passage ahead, and Suzuno stepped forward to do the same, but as she did so, something came out of the darkness, clattering into her and knocking her backwards off her feet and onto the rough stone ground of the cave floor.

Startled, she opened her mouth to let out a scream, but before she could make a sound a meaty hand was clamped over her face, and she felt herself roughly pulled back into one of the chamber's other many dark tunnelways. She tried to kick and struggle against her opponent, but it was to no avail, for whoever held her was strong enough to hold her firm.

At length they emerged into another underground chamber, and Suzuno found herself dumped on the ground unceremoniously as her abductor, a large man in his middle twenties towered over her. Suzuno cowered back, expecting him to hurt her in some further way, but as she gazed up at him in trepidation she saw that his eyes were not on her but on someone else across the far side of the dust-filled, dimly lit room. In the flickering light of the flame candles, the half-concealed stranger seemed even more sinister than the broad brute who had taken her hostage, and Suzuno swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry as she contemplated what they might be about to do to her. Tatara's face flashed before her thoughts, thenTokaki's, and she found that, in spite of her earlier irritation, she would give very much to see even the spiky-haired Seishi charge into the room at that moment, fists raised to defend her.

But noone came, and she was on her own.

The silence seemed to stretch on into infinity, and just as Suzuno was about to shriek to break the heavy atmosphere, the stranger in the far

corner shifted, getting to their feet as they came forward to examine their prey. Suzuno stared at them fearfully, struggling to make out this person's features in the dim, unsteady glow of the fire. Whoever they were, they were neither tall nor well built, piercing green eyes looking out from a face swathed with cloths as if to conceal their true identity. They were dressed in the same simple, unshowy wear as the man who had kidnapped her, yet there was somehow a grace and elegance to the cut of this person's clothing that was totally lost on the muscled monster who now leaned against the chamber wall, his brawny arms folded across his massive chest as he waited for his master to examine his catch.

"So."

The words were soft, barely more than a whisper, and they were tinged with the same western accent that Suzuno had heard in Tokaki's rough tones.

"Who might you be, maiden?"

Suzuno took a deep breath, struggling to calm her pounding heart.

"How dare you ask me that, when you had me brought here against my will!" She said frankly. "Your man was rough and rude — and you're not being much better. People in Sairou don't seem to have any manners at all — why have you grabbed me? What do you want? I don't have anything you can steal and I'm certainly not one of the grubby smugglers that are meant to haunt these mountains."

"Grubby smugglers, huh?" This seemed to entertain the speaker, who let out a low chuckle. "Whose hands do you think you've fallen into, missy? You might want to watch your language."

They gestured around them, and Suzuno's eyes widened with alarm and dismay as she realised how recklessly she had spoken. Where there had been one thug guarding the entrance, three or four more had emerged and, from what they were carrying, she knew that they were some of the smugglers of which Tokaki had spoken.

"You…" She whispered, and the figure nodded.

"You're slow, but you get there in the end." Came the amused response. "Shall we try again? Tell me your name, missy. Women don't stray around these parts often, unless they're courtesans or fools. You don't look like a courtesan, and you might yet be a fool — but I'm curious all the same."

"If you hurt me, Tokaki and Tatara will come and they'll kill you!" Suzuno threatened, and the stranger's eyes widened.

"I see." The voice was low and soft. "Tokaki and Tatara. Why is it I

know those names, do you think? Surely they're burned into the minds of every Sairou-jin for miles around. Yet you're ***not*** *Sairou-jin are you, little missy? You speak like the pampered daughter of a local Lord, so I thought you might be of use to us when I sent my men to get you. From how you speak, though, I'm intrigued. Tell me about Tokaki and Tatara, will you? I'd like to know exactly what you think you are."*

Suzuno clamped her jaw shut, and her captor laughed.

"All right. Play that game." Came the response, and slowly the dark-clad figure reached up to unwind the scarves from around their head, dropping them one by one to the floor as little by little their features became visible.

As they did, Suzuno's eyes opened wide and she let out a gasp.

"But you… you're a…"

"A woman?" Her companion snorted. "Yes, you really are slow. Of course I'm a woman — I should be insulted by that remark. Couldn't you tell that the moment I spoke to you? Or are you really a fool after all?"

"I just got grabbed by total strangers, thrust into a room with really bad lighting and faced with someone covered in scarves and veils." Despite herself Suzuno was getting annoyed. "I wasn't listening to your voice."

The woman stared at her for a moment. Then she laughed, dropping down on the floor in front of her and meeting Suzuno's surprised gaze with a playful one of her own. As she did so, she came full into the light of the flickering flame torches, and Suzuno was able to take in her appearance properly for the first time.

Her abductor was probably little older than Tokaki in age, she decided, certainly no more than twenty one. She was built on a miniature scale, for she was only a little taller than Suzuno herself, yet somehow there was a strength to the girl's small frame that belied her initial fragility. Vivid emerald eyes shone with an edge that Suzuno could not quantify, and thick chestnut brown hair was wound back from her face in a knot. Somehow, its colour reminded Suzuno of a visitor her father had once had from America. Then, as now, the mingling of red and brown in the thick locks fascinated her, winding two colours neatly into one, yet despite the warmth of the colour, the ends were dusty and tangled from the girl's time beneath the mountain stone. She was fairer than either Tokaki or Tatara, yet her skin still had a hint of the olive complexion that the other two Seishi shared, and somehow it too gave her a deceptively delicate air. Unlike her men, no sword or dagger hung at her belt, and instead Suzuno noticed the winding of a black leather whip, yet somehow from its appearance she knew it was very seldom used and more than likely just for show. With a

jolt Suzuno realised that despite the rough fabric of her clothing and the dusty, unkemptness of her hair, skin and nails, her abductor was a striking young woman.

"You are priceless." The stranger reflected now. "I'm almost tempted to keep you, just because of how cute you are when you're cross."

"Keep me?" Suzuno echoed, her appraisal forgotten in her indignation, and the woman raised her hand in a dismissive gesture.

"You can calm down. I don't plan on hurting you." She said casually. "I was just curious, that's all. You're not associated with the court, I can tell — and so you're not with people who've come to root us out or arrest us for working in the mountains like we do."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The truth is, I never really thought you were." She admitted. "But I had to eliminate the possibility I'd made a mistake. I've been waiting for you to come. I knew that you would, sooner or later. So now you have, I wanted to find out as much as I could about you. I like to know things. Don't you?"

"You haven't told me much, so right now I don't know anything." Suzuno looked suspicious. "Who are you and why were you waiting for me? What do you want with me?"

"You really don't let anything go, do you?" The woman looked resigned. "Fine. I had to separate you from your companions, that's all. I wanted to talk, just you and I. And I couldn't do that with the others there. That tall, dark haired one — he's from the Tsuonie-ke, isn't he? It would've been too risky, had he seen me face to face."

"Tsuonie…" Suzuno's brows knitted together. "You mean Tatara-san? I don't understand — why do you think he would hurt you? Tatara-san wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Maybe, maybe not." The woman said categorically. She frowned, pursing her lips together as she considered the situation. Then she raised her gloved right hand, gesturing for her attendants to leave them alone. Without a word they did so, melting from the chamber as silently as shadows, and Suzuno found herself alone with the strange young woman.

"Well?" She murmured. "What now?"

"I didn't really expect you to come alone, so I was prepared for all eventualities." The young woman smiled. "I'm sorry if you were treated a bit roughly, but I will explain. First of all, though, I need to know. You… are Byakko no Miko, aren't you? And the ones who surround you are the

chosen spirits, Tokaki and Tatara?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Tell me and I might answer your question."

"Answer my question and I'll tell you." Suzuno countered. "I don't even know your name yet."

"True enough." Her companion acknowledged. "But I know yours. OosugiSuzuno… isn't that right? Sixteen years old. Born in the Miko's world, in a town called 'Morioka'.And now you come here surrounded by stars of Byakko's sky in order to save this country from corruption and disaster. Am I close?"

"How do you know all that?" Suzuno paled, and the girl let out an amused chuckle.

"My name is Han Jiene." She said casually. "So now we're more or less even, aren't we?"

"Not really." Suzuno shook her head, ignoring the hand that had been proffered in her direction. "You've not told me anything at all, and I still don't know what you want with me! I told you, if you hurt me, Tokaki and Tatara will…"

"Relax. I told you, I won't hurt you." Jiene held up her hands in mock-surrender. "If I meant you harm, I'd have unleashed my men on you properly. As it is, I only told them to grab you and bring you here, so we can talk. And we are talking. Aren't we? Girl to girl, just like I'd hoped. I really didn't expect you to take a hate at me right away — although you look a little pampered and well-kept, so maybe my methods are a bit rough for you. I'm sorry… I suppose it's just how I am."

*"You **are** a smuggler, aren't you?"*

"Yes, that's right. In a manner of speaking." Jiene nodded her head. "Does that repulse you, Suzuno-chan? Or are you simply scared of what kind of cutthroat maid takes to the mountains in order to scrape a living from illegally trafficking diamonds?"

"Neither. Both." Suzuno frowned. "I don't know. It doesn't seem like a very ladylike thing to do."

"No, it really isn't." Jiene leant back against the cavern wall, idly toying with the gauze glove that covered her right hand from view. It lacked a pair, Suzuno noticed, and at her glance, Jiene's smile widened.

"All in good time." She said, as if anticipating the question that Suzuno had been about to ask. "For now, I'll try and explain about the smuggling.

You're a stranger to this world, so you won't know all the ins and outs of it yet. For that you can be forgiven — I certainly don't hold it against you, being a friend of the Tsuonie-ke without understanding the implications."

"You're talking about Tatara-san again, aren't you." Suzuno frowned. "Why? I don't understand. Tatara-san is a kind and gentle person. What can he possibly have done to make you hate him?"

"I don't hate him." Jiene shook her head. "You're putting words into my mouth. It's not that way at all."

"Then…"

"I've never met this Tatara person, although I know who he is." Jiene said with a smile. "He has a sister, Keri — did you know that, too?"

"Yes… he said he had a sister." Suzuno said slowly. "But that they weren't really in contact. That she'd married, but… well, it was complicated. But if his family did something bad, Jiene-san, you shouldn't blame Tatara for it. Whatever it was, I'm sure he's not involved and doesn't know anything about it at all."

"Suddenly you've gone from answering me back to calling me Jiene-san and begging me not to judge your allies so easily." Jiene said thoughtfully. "So your bond is already that strong, then, with your Seishi? You truly are the Miko, just as I expected you would be."

She sighed.

"I have to trust you, although to do so might risk my life and everything I've worked hard for." She said softly. "I know this, and I've agonised over it. I know I must cross the path of the Tsuonie-ke, and even face my own shadows before everything is done. But I can't avoid it, so I may as well embrace it. From what you say, your Tatara is as much an exile from his family as I am from mine… correct?"

"I don't know about you, but I know Tatara-san was living in a monastery or something like it, when Tokaki took me to meet him." Suzuno said cautiously, and Jiene nodded.

"Good. That makes my life easier." She said with a sigh of satisfaction. "All right. Then I will trust you. I will tell you the truth, and hope you know what you should do with it. I told you my name, after all. Han Jiene. Noone in these caves knows me by that name. Noone ever has. You are the first person I've ever revealed my true identity to, even after four years running these passages and leading so many people through difficult and dangerous situations."

"Why?" Despite herself, Suzuno was startled. "I'm a stranger and you

kidnapped me. Why would you tell me that?"

Fear touched her heart.

"Are you… going to kill me?"

"Don't be stupid." Jiene snorted. "Wouldn't that be hurting you? I don't kill people… it's not in my nature to end life. Never has been. I leave that to the more disgusting branches of my family tree. No, Suzuno-chan. That's not it. Truth is, I've waited for you because I think you're the one who can finally put the messy pieces of this country's failing political system back together. If you really are Byakko no Miko, then I have to make you understand. And even though you look at me and see a dirty smuggler who's breaking laws left right and centre, I want to make you see who I really am. Who we all really are."

"I don't see how you can make it any better." Suzuno frowned. "Smuggling is stealing. You're taking from people's livelihoods — aren't you? People who work in the mines and put all their effort in. Isn't it them you're taking things from, in the end? For your own gain?"

"If only it were so simple." Jiene shook her head. "Suzuno-chan, you will soon learn that the Emperor of Sairou is a powerful man, but that he does not hold all the power. In fact, for the past four years Sairou has been governed in his name only — a fact so well covered up that few of the general population are even aware of it. Four years ago Meishitei-heika fell into a strange trance-like coma, from which no physician has been able to rouse him. At that time, his son was a boy of thirteen, and so the government of the realm has been handled largely by Meishitei-heika's consort and the Imperial Council."

"And that's strange why?" Suzuno looked blank. "I don't understand."

Jiene sighed.

"It isn't unusual." She agreed. "But now the Prince is seventeen, power should have passed to his hands. Still, it hasn't. You see, Meishitei-heika's consort is not just a token Queen but a woman of some influence in her own right."

She cast her companion a quizzical look.

"If I said to you 'Kutou', would you know where that was?" She asked. Suzuno bit her lip, slowly shaking her head, and Jiene sighed.

"I suppose it can't be helped." She said resignedly. "All right. This is Sairou, you know that. To the north is Hokkan. To the South, Kounan. And to the East — the far East, which shares no borders with this land — is Kutou. They're as different from Sairou as you can imagine. A warrior

nation, historically — but powerful and profitable because of their climate and plentiful supplies of water."

She spread her hands.

"In any case, a hundred years ago, they tried to invade Hokkan but failed, because of the coming of Genbu no Miko." She said slowly. "It dampened their ambition, and they've been quiet for quite some time, under a series of royal Emperors, each of which has spent most of his time consolidating the land he rules and not bothering too much about his neighbours. However…"

"However?"

"Twenty years ago, the Emperor of Kutou offered his eldest daughter Makiko to Sairou's Emperor Meishitei-heika as a potential bride." She said evenly. "I'll spare you the detailed genetics, since you don't know anything about these lands or the peoples that live here. But after the defeat to Genbu, some families in Kutou lost faith in the power of their warrior Dragon God Seiryuu and turned to other forces for consolation. Some worship the Earth, others the Sky. Some focus on the animals they see around them, depicting them in holy artwork in much the same way as we deify the Tiger who watches over us. And some follow another element. A force known as 'Tenkou' — a cult which, in some areas, is gathering pace. It's said even members of Kutou's royal house have begun doing homage to this deity. And Princess Makiko is one such follower."

"And that's a bad thing?" Suzuno looked confused. Jiene shrugged.

"It's a cult shrouded in darkness, yet it is gathering pace at Sairou's court thanks to Makiko-kougou-sama's presence here." She said grimly. "Byakko's temples have become desecrated or abandoned in some areas and some families have even risen up against others in what can only be described as the starts of a religious civil war. Sairou has always been level and peaceful, but now neighbours fight neighbours as if under the lure of some dark spell. And over all of this is the threat that at any time the fragile peace with Kutou could break down and the East could gather forces and invade. Makiko's coming here was supposed to cement the bond between East and West. Instead it looks like her presence will provide the bridge to allow Kutou to grab more territory that doesn't belong to them."

She sighed.

"I've heard some even call Makiko-kougou-sama a witch possessed of demon arts who bewitched the King into both marriage and his current catatonic state. Those people have often disappeared or died in mysterious circumstances." She added. "There is never any proof against her, but whatever she is or isn't, it seems she's embraced the Tenkou cult deep

within her heart. And since she — and it — came to be at the Emperor's side, Sairou has slowly begun to wither and die."

She gestured around her at the dark cave.

"For some people, this is the only shelter and safety they have." She added. "Several have had members of their family disappear at random. Others have seen those they loved arbitrarily killed on trumped up charges of deception or treason, with little evidence. Each death serves some kind of purpose and plays a part in a bigger picture, but even I can't yet see what that picture is. That's why I had to see you — I had to meet you here today, in order to make those things ring clearer in my mind."

"You've lost me." Suzuno admitted. "Are you saying the Queen of Sairou is… some kind of demon?"

"I'm saying she's a dangerous person to cross." Jiene said grimly. "I told you my name was Han, didn't I? My family have served the Emperor in the shadows for generations… since Sairou's history began, most likely. Even now, there are Han-ke at the Court's beck and call, keeping their mouths shut in the midst of heresy and turning their back on Byakko to support a foreign Queen. But I chose to exile myself from there when I realised how deep things had begun to run. My father unearthed it in the beginning, and he was murdered for daring to ask too many questions. I expect I am also on her death list by association, if she should find me… but so far she hasn't managed to do so. I'm here, after all. Beneath the blessed mountains, in a place I feel safe."

"She killed your father?" Suzuno's eyes opened wide, and Jiene nodded.

"He was just one of many." She agreed gravely. "Rumours say the souls of her victims are summoned by her through some religious ritual and used to trawl the land as demon spirits, searching for more innocents to subjugate or sacrifice before Tenkou or simply drag down to the grave. My family are unforgivably tied to that cause by remaining associated to the Court and Meishitei's self appointed regent despite all these things… so I left the Han-ke altogether."

She smiled faintly.

"Tsuonie Keri is the wife of one of my kin." She added. "She is a Han by marriage, now. And so, naturally, I am suspicious of showing myself to any of her surviving kinsfolk. Whether he be peaceful or not, it is a danger."

"So why this? Why smuggle?" Suzuno demanded. "If I believe everything you've said, how are you the innocent party in all of this? You're still stealing, right?"

"Taxes and duties are high and most of the miners don't receive even half of the wages due them because of it." Jiene explained. "And Makiko-kougou-sama also expects everyone to make a token offering to her deity in order to assure their continued protection. With my insight and education, I've been able to help those suppressed people find ways around that little problem. The people you believe I'm stealing from are actually the ones who benefit from our trading. Smuggling isn't all about cheating the workers, you know. In this case it's about cheating the fat cat tax collectors… and there are plenty of people over the Southern border willing to take the gamble to get a cheap deal on Sairou gemstones. And not only that — it's defending the people who keep faith in Byakko, too. He's our God — our only true God. And this heretic faith from the East has to be curtailed."

"I see." Suzuno rubbed her temples, trying to process everything. "And what if I don't believe you? You did still kidnap me, Jiene-san. And that's still a rude thing to do. Your man is rough and my arms are probably going to be all bruised. Not to mention the way he clamped his hand over my mouth."

"You didn't bite him, I noticed that." Jiene reflected, and Suzuno shivered.

"As if I wanted to bite any part of him." She said derisively. "That's revolting."

Jiene laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

"I rather like you." She reflected. "And I'm glad. I didn't know how I'd feel when this day came… I'm glad I don't hate you. Even more glad that you're not a fool. However you feel about this land yet, Suzuno, I think you have plenty of brains and courage, should you choose to use them. A good heart, too. You had genuine concern in your tones when I spoke of my father, even though I'd treated you so casually. I won't forget that — subconscious words and gestures are the ones that reflect who we really are, after all. You can't fool instinct."

She hesitated, then carefully removed the glove from her hand, setting it down on the cold stone of the cavern floor.

"You looked at this earlier, and wondered why I wore only one, didn't you?" She asked, and Suzuno nodded her head.

"I'll show you." Jiene's smile widened, and she spread the fingers of her right hand, stretching them out so that Suzuno could see them clearly. As she did so, something white began to glimmer on the tip of her index finger, and Suzuno's eyes almost fell out of her head.

“A… Byakko… mark?” She whispered, and Jiene nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Toroki’s mark. See? I knew you weren’t completely stupid.”

“But… you’re a woman.”

“And?”

“Well, I thought…” Suzuno blushed, and Jiene grinned.

“You thought that a Miko would be surrounded by strong, dashing, brave young men ready to rescue her from danger?” She asked playfully, and Suzuno reddened.

“No, it’s not that. I just…”

“Seishi is a rather masculine term, perhaps.” Jiene glanced at her mark thoughtfully, then shrugged her shoulders. “But I wouldn’t say that the way I’ve chosen to live of late is very feminine, either. So I don’t suppose it matters too much. Besides, by birth I’m Han-ke born, much as it shames me to admit it. I might not be very big, but I can fight my corner — you needn’t worry about that.”

She paused, eying her companion pensively.

“It might be better for you to have a girl or two around you.” She added cryptically. “The hearts of young women are easily swayed by young men, so I’m told. Your duty is more important than anything else, Suzuno. I’m going to warn you now not to let yourself get distracted. No matter how dashing or how brave those who surround you are… you mustn’t waver in your focus or your resolve. If you do, you’ll only wind up crying over it. It can’t end well… so heed my warning now before it happens. All right?”

“I beg your pardon?” Suzuno looked startled. “What are you saying?”

“That you should guard that big heart of yours, and keep a safe distance between yourself and those who you meet here in the ShijinTenchishou.” Jiene said categorically. “Especially if they happen to be male.”

“I’m not planning on doing anything silly or reckless, you know!” Suzuno objected, her cheeks flushing hotly with embarrassment as she understood Jiene’s implications. “Besides, Tatara and Tokaki both told me about that. That the Miko has to be pure and chaste and… all of those things. And my father would hate it if he thought I was acting in any other way. You needn’t worry! I have no intention of falling in love with anyone. This world isn’t my world, after all. It’s a world inside a book and I want to go home to my world when all of this is over!”

Jiene smiled, nodding.

“Hold onto that thought.” She advised. “I have a feeling you might find it more of a challenge than you think, but so long as you keep that in mind, Suzuno-chan, all will be well.”

She brushed her fingers together, a whitish glow surrounding her hands as she did so.

“Now I’ll show you how it is I knew you were coming.” She said softly. “Toroki’sByakko-given gift is the gift of sight, Suzuno-chan. The future.The past.The present. Mine. Yours. Other people’s. Little by little they come to me in pictures — fragments to begin with, but bit by bit they become clear. As one comes true, so others become more vivid. Now I’ve met with you, surely I’ll see more clearly the hints I’ve had regarding the dangers in Sairou. So I’m glad that you’re here. I knew you would come, after all. And so you have. Exactly as I pictured you — right down to the ropes of hair either side of your face.”

Suzuno reddened again, and Jiene smiled again, humour in her emerald gaze.

“Your friends will probably be here to find you soon.” She added. “And for the time being, I’d rather you didn’t mention to them that I’m a member of the Han-ke. I suspect they will be cross enough with my methods of meeting with you, so I’d rather not complicate things.”

“All right.” Suzuno looked nonplussed. “So I’ll just call you Jiene-san, then?”

“No… no.” Jiene shook her head. “Ever since I came to the mountain, I’ve lived only under the name of ‘Toroki’. The men who work for me and the people they support in the villages and even the shelters deep within this Spider’s Peak have always called me that, and flocked to me because of this mark on my index finger. Noone at court knows that Han Jiene bears the mark of the Tiger. Only my father ever knew and he took the secret to his grave. So call me Toroki. That way is easier. Then noone need ever know.”

She winked.

“And you might be cross with me, still. But you will need me, and I know Sairou needs you.” She added. “This is the beginning of a partnership, Suzuno-chan. So sit back and just watch — I’ll show you exactly what I mean.”

She spread her hands, and Suzuno’s hands flew to her mouth as she registered the blurring and glittering of the atmosphere between her companion’s fingers as slowly pictures became visible before them on the cave wall.

“What is that?” She breathed. “How are you…?”

“Toroki’s other power is to project delusion… either into the atmosphere or against an enemy.” Toroki responded simply. “It’s a tricky tactic typical of a Han-ke member, and I use it as sparingly as possible because it can have adverse side effects for anyone who happens to get in its way. But this way hurts noone. I’m showing you what I see, Suzuno. The scraps and pictures that have begun to piece together inside of me to form some kind of coherent future.”

Suzuno squinted at the image.

“But that’s… Tokaki and… Tatara-san?”

“Yes.” Toroki nodded. “And they’ll very definitely soon be with us. Those passages are not far from this chamber. They’re looking for you, Suzuno-chan — and they seem quite worried. Tokaki’s mark is blazing on his cheek for all to see — I wouldn’t like to get in his way, given that look in his eyes.”

She laughed.

“He’s quite the fighter, as I think you’ll see.”

“He keeps bragging about that.” Suzuno admitted. “But surely he won’t attack you? You’re a girl, after all.”

“If he thought I was going to hurt you, I imagine he would.” Toroki shrugged her shoulders. “But you don’t think I’m the enemy any more, do you?”

“I… don’t know.” Suzuno admitted. “I’m confused. But… I guess… not. If you’re… Toroki…”

“Then I must be on your side?” Toroki finished the sentence, and Suzuno nodded.

“Something like that.”

“That’s a naive assumption.” Toroki said chidingly. “You shouldn’t assume that all the people who bear the white mark will automatically come over to your side. I’m putting myself deliberately before you because it’s part of the future I’m moulding in my head. But that future also shows other things — other shadows. Look closer at my projection. This is another fragment of what is to come — take careful note.”

With a sweep of light, the ghostly image changed to the inside of an unfamiliar hallway, and Suzuno saw a brief glimpse of a shadow darting from the darkness, a weapon drawn as he launched himself at Tokaki. A struggle ensued, and as the shadow drew back for a second assault, Suzuno

saw the glitter of something white at the man's throat. She stared at Toroki in dismay, and Toroki nodded, lowering her hands as the images faded into nothing.

"One of Byakko's people lives in the shadows, following the creature that is Makiko-kougou-sama into darkness." She said softly. "The one who bears the mark of Amefuri at his throat. We will meet him, sure enough, and we will fight him, too. Where his loyalties truly lie, only he knows. His spirit is closed to one like me… I do not know how to reach him. But cross him — yes, we must. And somehow, turn his loyalty to her and her heresy into passion for Byakko's crusade."

Despite herself, a cold shiver went through Suzuno's body, and Toroki sent her a reassuring smile.

"Cheer up." She said briskly. "It's not yet. And it's only a brief piece of a future I don't yet fully understand. What you saw then will happen, but the outcome I still don't know. Nor do I know the cause. It can't be changed, but even so, it doesn't mean all hope is lost."

Before Suzuno could respond, the wall of the cavern began to crack, sending chips of sandstone down onto the floor and she let out an exclamation, shuffling away from it as she gazed up in fear at the ceiling she felt sure would soon start to cave in on them. Toroki got to her feet, flexing her fingers thoughtfully.

"Your protectors are here." She said softly. "Well? What are you going to do, Suzuno? Sell me to them as a smuggler and an exile of court? Or will you acknowledge me as one of Byakko's and keep faith with the things I've shown you? It's up to you, now. What kind of Miko are you going to be… are you strong enough to make up your own mind, regardless of how someone first appears before you?"

A brief memory of first Tokaki's barren hut then Tatara's floral chamber flashed through Suzuno's mind, and she swallowed hard. As she did so, the wall crumbled away to reveal Tatara, long sweeping vines curling around the stone and pushing it away in the cloud of residual dust and sand. There was an uncharacteristically angry glint in his dark violet eyes, making them seem for the first time steely and resolute, and as he spread his hands to cast the wild threads of vine deeper into the chamber, she saw Tokaki not far behind him, his own amber eyes glittering with an indignant light. For a moment, fear paralysed her, as for the first time she registered the two men as fighters and not just her protectors. Then, from somewhere, she grasped hold of her resolve and she stepped forward, putting herself between the advancing Seishi and her newest companion.

"Stop!" She exclaimed. "Tatara-san, you'll bring the whole cave down!

*Please! **Stop**!"*

At the sound of her voice, Tatara froze, sending her a startled look, and in the pause Tokaki hurried forward, grabbing her by the shoulders as he glanced her up and down.

"What do you mean, stop?" he demanded. "We were worried about you! You completely disappeared, even after I told you not to wander off! And all you can do is yell stop?"

"It's all right. I'm all right." Suzuno pulled herself free from his grasp, sending the bewildered Tatara an apologetic look. "And I'm sorry. Thank you for coming to rescue me — I didn't mean that. It's just… I'm not in any danger. It isn't like that at all. I mean, she just wanted to talk to me. That's all."

"To talk?" Tatara stepped slowly into the chamber, spreading his hands as the vine unwound itself from the corners of the chamber, withdrawing and disappearing back into the tiny seed that he held in his palm. His fingers closed around it, and he tilted his head on one side, a question in his gaze. "What kind of talk? What do you mean?"

"It's my fault." Toroki stood forward, bowing towards the two men with a playful glint in her green eyes. "I caused all the trouble in the first place. But I had to speak to Byakko no Miko and I didn't know a better way of getting her attention. I didn't mean her any harm."

"Who the hell are you?" Tokaki demanded, and Toroki smiled, holding up her hand.

"Your comrade." She said simply, as the character glittered on her finger. "Toroki. I'm pleased to meet you… and I look forward to us working together from hereon in."

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

"It's not possible."

Keisuke sat back in his seat, staring aghast at first his sister then his brother-in-law as he slowly shook his head in disbelief.

"The book I gave Arina was nothing more than an old notebook. Just scribbles and vague memories written by Oosugi Suzuno about her time in the ShijinTenchishou. She'd been doing so much research into the whole ancient Chinese business that I thought she might find it interesting… that's all. Her research has all been fairly ordinary — and there's never been a hint of anything else in anything she's asked or told me. Just that she wanted to find a way for Hikari to come back… and to learn as much about the other world as she could. She never mentioned going there in any capacity."

"But it's undoubtedly her." Miaka twisted her hands together in her lap. "Taka and I watched the clip several times on Makkun's PC, Keinii. It's Arina all right. No mistake about it. Surrounded by white light, just as I was engulfed in red light when Suzaku called me."

"And Makoto was the one who found the report?"

"Yes." Taka frowned. "It seems he knows a lot more about everything than we'd thought. He… he also has *the* book. In his room."

"The book." Keisuke's eyes narrowed. "That was my next question, whether somehow Arina had got that book and taken it with her to Morioka. But if *Makkun* has it…"

"It's here, Uncle Keisuke." Makoto himself pushed open the door at that moment, holding the battered volume up in his hand as he came to join the group. "But it only talks about Hikari-neesan's time in the book. It doesn't mention Arina-san at all. Not even since this afternoon, because I've checked. It stops with the summoning of that Seiryuu dragon creature."

"May I see?" Keisuke asked, and Makoto nodded, handing the ShijinTenchishou to his uncle and settling himself on the floor.

"Sure." He agreed. "But you won't find anything. It's just a storybook, now. It hasn't changed a bit."

Keisuke paused, eying the youngster keenly.

“You really are more informed on all of this than we realised, aren’t you?” He reflected, and Makoto nodded.

“I want to know everything I don’t already know, too.” He agreed. “And whatever you’re here to talk to Mum and Dad about, I want to be involved. In *all* of it. I’m not a baby and I’m sick of being left out.”

Keisuke glanced at Miaka, who shrugged.

“All of this stems from Hikari, and more, from Taka and I.” She responded. “And we’re the people closest to Makkun, when you stop and think it over. Since he knows, there’s no point in trying to pretend otherwise. If he wants to be involved, Kei-nii, then I guess we have to let him be.”

A glitter of triumph surfaced in Makoto’s dark brown eyes, and Keisuke rubbed his temples, slowly nodding his head.

“All right.” He agreed. “If that’s how it is.”

He reached down to rummage in his bag, pulling out an envelope and setting it down on his lap.

“I worked late this evening, so I pretty much came in, had dinner and then got your call.” He added. “I didn’t have time to look at any post before I came over here, but Mayo said that it looked like Arina’s handwriting on the envelope, so when I heard what had happened I thought it might be something important. Neither Mayo or I have seen this news report of Makoto’s — but if you still have it on the PC, Makkun, I’d like to see it later on. For now, however, I really want to know what’s in here — what she felt was so important she needed to drop through my door even knowing I’d be working until late in the evening.”

“Something she’d discovered?” Taka suggested, and Keisuke shrugged.

“In the circumstances, I’m wondering if that’s it.” He agreed. He sighed, shaking his head.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have encouraged her… maybe I’ve become some kind of catalyst for this kind of thing.” He continued. “But I didn’t see the harm in Suzuno-san’s old diary. I’ve had it since Tetsuya & I went to Morioka and it’s never done anything at all. Yui’s seen it. You might even have done, Miaka-chan. It never did anything then. I suppose it never occurred to me that it ever would.”

“But you think it has something to do with it now?” Taka asked,

and Keisuke nodded.

“Has to.” He agreed, slitting the seal of the envelope with his fingernail. “Arina was swallowed up by white light, wasn’t she? Byakko’s light is white… when Suzuno-san passed away, her spirit and Tatara’s were both bathed in white light. Tetsuya and I both saw it so I know it wasn’t imagination. Arina had no connection to anything of Byakko’s till I gave her the book. And she went to Morioka because I told her about Suzuno, that’s for sure. So it must be the connecting factor. I just don’t understand how.”

“It’s not that difficult to figure it out.” Makoto said flippantly. “Mum got sucked in by Suzaku. Hikari-neesan and Aunt Mayo both got sucked in by him, too, and Yui-san got pulled in by Seiryuu. This Byakko creature obviously liked something about Arina-san so decided to take her in the same way.”

“But Byakko’s legend is over. Suzuno-san was successful and Byakko saved Sairou.” Miaka pointed out softly. “I know that because Yui-chan had the Shinzahou from Tatara and used it to raise Seiryuu. If Suzuno-san hadn’t been able to summon Byakko and make her wishes, then there wouldn’t have been a Shinzahou at all.”

“Yui left behind a Shinzahou, yet Kutou still needed Hikari to save the East.” Taka reminded her, and Miaka sighed.

“True.” She agreed at length. “But Kutou was… different. Yui-chan didn’t… couldn’t save it. It’s not the same. She and I… because we were both there at the same time, everything got messed up. Suzuno-san and Takiko-san finished their legends properly.”

“That was my impression, too.” Keisuke admitted. “But maybe we need to look again.”

He pulled open the envelope, sliding his hand inside as he pulled out the clipped together sheets of notepaper that Arina had hurriedly shoved inside before leaving on her trip north. He paused, then frowned, reading her brief note aloud.

“*Keisuke-san*,

I’m going to Morioka to see Suzuno-san’s grave today, but I hope we can meet up when I get back because I’ve things I’d like to talk to you about.”

He began slowly.

“*I can’t really explain why I want to go there, just that it’s something I feel I need to do.*

I think you were wrong about the book being just a diary. It seems more

than that to me. Perhaps it sounds strange, but when I look inside it I feel like I'm a part of everything, and that somehow I'm seeing right into Suzuno-san's memories.

I'll call you when I get back to Tokyo and hopefully it won't be too late for me to drop by and see you. For now I've included some notes and bits I've found out in the last few days. Maybe if you have time to look at it when you get back from work you'll be able to explain to me the things I don't understand."

He glanced up.

"She's just signed it at that." He added. "It's not much to go on."

"But it does agree with what you said. That that book was more than you thought it was." Taka observed.

"Seeing into Suzuno's memories." Miaka murmured. "That sounds almost like what Mayo said happened to her when she found the ShijinTenchishou. That she saw into everything that happened to me, as if it had flashed through her head in pictures."

"But that was *that* book." Keisuke pointed at the ShijinTenchishou. "None of us know what it is or isn't capable of doing in the final analysis. But this book of Suzuno's…"

"It's the same thing, isn't it?" Makoto interjected, and Keisuke sent him a quizzical look.

"Same?"

"That book tells the story of some girl saving some strange world full of ancient Chinese religious hoodoo." Makoto leant back against the wall, eying his uncle pensively. "Right? That's what it sounded like when I read about Hikari-neesan. It was full of all kinds of girly things and hero things and stuff. And it used to say the same things about Mum and Dad — didn't it? Isn't that what you meant, Mum, when you said Aunt Mayo saw your story when she picked up the book?"

"Yes." Miaka agreed. "Just like that."

"I see what you mean." Keisuke's expression cleared. "It's not the book at all, but the story… you know, Makkun, I've been slow but you're right. The second time Suzaku called on your parents, he used an ancient scroll in which the story of the ShijinTenchishou was originally recorded — Chinese text and all. When Tetsuya and I went North to Morioka we found out that Okuda Einosuke translated that scroll and brought it to Japan… and his daughter was the first girl to

be taken as a Miko. It isn't the medium after all. It's the words. The telling of the story. Suzuno's diary told the story of her time in the ShijinTenchishou. Maybe it was even there with her — I don't honestly know for sure because I only read bits and pieces when I had it. But maybe just by telling Byakko's legend it became a *part* of Byakko's legend. And… maybe… the key to open some kind of doorway."

"But *you* didn't get sucked into it, Uncle, so it's kinda picky." Makoto pointed out. "Since if you had it that long, and it never did anything…"

"I'm not a young girl." Keisuke said ruefully. "And if I'd given the book to you, Makkun, you'd have probably found that nothing happened, either. This world is only interested in maidens through which its spells can be carried out. I always felt it was unfair — I always wanted to be involved. But it didn't want me. It wanted Miaka, Mayo, Yui… Hikari. And now, maybe, Arina."

"*Dad* went into it." Makoto objected, and Taka shook his head.

"No… technically it's the other way." He responded. "I came out of it. I was born in that world, Makkun. The original Tamahome's incarnation was in the place your sister now is. Like she's modified to be a part of that world, so I did to be a part of this. To be with your mother, I took the sacrifices and challenges and did what I had to do to stay here. So the book didn't choose me. I'm just connected to it for that reason. You could say I'm a special case."

"I see." Makoto looked thoughtful. "I wondered what Neesan was babbling on about when I read about Tamahome and you and stuff in the book. I hadn't realised it was as screwed up as that… yeesh, no wonder Hikari wound up staying there permanently. She and I are half from that world and half from this, aren't we?"

He let out his breath in a rush.

"I guess giving that kind of information to a kid when they're small could seriously mess with their heads." He added. "Maybe it wasn't so bad of you not to say anything, after all."

"It was just too difficult to explain." Miaka sighed heavily. "Till the book chose her, Makkun, Hikari knew nothing of it either. But her connection is stronger than yours. She's a girl, like your Uncle said, but she's also more than that. She was the one I chose to carry Suzaku's power. She's Suzaku's Shinzahou. You belong in this world, but because of that magic, now Hikari belongs in that. I don't know how else to explain it, but that's the way it is."

“I figured that much out from what I read, and from what happened when Hikari-neesan left.” Makoto admitted. “And reading bits of that book just confirmed it.”

“I hope you’ve been doing your homework for school as well as reading the book.” Taka said sharply, and Makoto shrugged.

“It’s not like school is hard.” He said dismissively. “I can do my homework and read a few lines of old-fashioned script, Dad. I’m not Hikari. I’m the one who gets straight As, remember?”

“Well, mind that you do.” Taka warned. “Because if your grades start to slip any as a result of being involved in this stuff, I promise you it’ll be the last you ever hear about the ShijinTenchishou.”

“Taka…” Miaka shook her head slowly. “Don’t. Makoto won’t slack… he’s a responsible kid when it comes to his grades and he always has been. We should trust in him… this time, I think we shouldn’t leave him out of any of it. He’s probably missing Hikari too, after all. Just like us.”

Makoto looked startled, then he smiled wryly.

“It’s funny, but I miss her more now she isn’t here than I ever wanted her here when she was.” He admitted sheepishly. “Who would’ve thought I’d miss having arguments with her over stupid stuff… but the place is quieter now and it’s weird, somehow. I guess I do wish she was back here… though I swear, if anyone ever tells her that, I’ll deny it wholesale.”

“Keisuke, what has Arina given you?” Taka glanced at his brother in law, who had been skimming through the notes from the envelope with a troubled expression on his face. He glanced up, shrugging his shoulders.

“Something that I wish I’d seen before she went to Morioka.” He said quietly, setting a couple of the sheets down on the table in front of them. One was a picture, and Miaka reached over to pick it up, letting out an exclamation of surprise as she met her brother’s gaze with incredulous hazel eyes.

“But Kei-nii… this is…”

“Tatara of the Byakko Seven. I know.” Keisuke agreed grimly. “Right down to the smallest detail. I know I only saw his spirit in that brief instant that he crossed the divide and came to meet with Suzuno, but it’s not something I’d ever forget. As soon as I saw this, I recognised him.”

“Not just that.” Taka’s expression became grim as he leant over his wife’s shoulder. “The other one is Tokaki. Tamahome… my old *Shishou* and another of Byakko’s people. Did Arina draw these?”

“She did.” Keisuke agreed. “More to the point, she’s written the names underneath the characters. True enough, she’s written *Tokaki* only in basic script, but she’s written *Tatara* in the right kanji, and that’s far too much to be coincidental. Even if she’d heard about the story of Byakko or read about it in detail in Suzuno-san’s book, there’s no way she could have got all the details so close. If even I can recognise this figure as Tatara from the brief glimpse I got of his ghost, and if you’re sure that this other one is Tokaki… what are we dealing with?”

“What Arina herself said.” Miaka reached out to touch her fingers against the edge of the note. “That she saw into Suzuno-san’s memories somehow, and drew the characters as she witnessed them. Although it’s impossible, it’s the only explanation. The diary isn’t just a diary after all. It’s what you said. Some kind of key. And Arina…”

“Is now somewhere we can’t easily reach her, or help her.” Keisuke said grimly. “If she’s in the book world, we’ve no way of following her actions or knowing what kind of danger she may have fallen into. She may still have Suzuno’s book with her, or she may have dropped it in Morioka. Either way, it isn’t here and we have no way of knowing what kind of memories she was seeing. She’s made a couple of notes — about a desert storm, and a room full of flowers — but nothing as vivid as her pictures.”

“I guess that’s what she was going to talk to you about.” Miaka bit her lip. “When she came back from Morioka.”

“What’s this?” Makoto picked up a sheet that had dropped on the floor, peering at it then holding it out. “It looks like some kind of weird star-chart — is that to do with all this as well?”

“Let me see.” Keisuke peered at it, then frowned, brushing his finger against the paper.

“This isn’t like the others. Arina didn’t write this, and nor did I.” He realised. “This paper is old — as if it’s been made in a traditional way, not mass-produced. It’s cheap, perhaps, but not like anything we’d find on the high street. And the script isn’t hers — it’s a lot older, and not overly clear in places. Bits of it have been smudged, and a lot of it is written in Chinese. But it looks like a rough plan of Byakko’s stellar sky. Drawn by someone who had knowledge, even if they were in a hurry to write that knowledge down.”

“You mean… this came from… inside that world?” Miaka asked, and Keisuke shrugged.

“It’s not impossible.” He said cautiously. “Or it could have been written by Suzuno-san herself, or her Father, even, since he was a very well-published man — an Academic. The paper seems really old, but I couldn’t say it came from Ancient China or from some other world that mimics ancient Chinese culture. It may just have been a facsimile produced for some other purpose. All I know is that Arina didn’t write it.”

“But it *could* have been one of Suzuno’s Seishi?”

“I guess so.”

Keisuke squinted at the corner of the parchment. “Something’s scribbled here, but I don’t know… how to read it. The characters look like a name, but it’s not that easy to make out. The first one looks like it might be… Han? And the next… the next is… Da… Ta… Dai, maybe. The final one I can’t make out. But if it is a name, it could be read any number of ways. I might be making it up.”

He glanced at Taka questioningly.

“Tamahome knew Tokaki — does the name Han mean anything to you?”

“My memories of that childhood are fragmented alongside the memories of Taka’s childhood.” Taka admitted, running his fingers through his thick dark hair as he considered. “So I’m not sure exactly whether or not Tokaki ever told Tamahome about his adventures with the Byakko Shichi Seishi. Subaru, perhaps — since Subaru was his wife. And Tatara I met along with Miaka when we fought Miboshi in the temple in the West. But the others… I don’t remember. If he did, it would have been fleetingly and probably by stellar names. It wouldn’t have meant anything, otherwise, to a young kid who was learning how to fight his corner.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Miaka sighed. “The question is, what do we do about it? Arina’s picture will be everywhere. The event got filmed and people are going to be as quizzical about it as they were about me all those years ago. And there’s Arina’s family, too. Even though they’re so busy, won’t they be worried if she’s disappeared into a blast of white light? What are we meant to tell them?”

“Nothing at all.” Taka said firmly, and Miaka stared at him.

“But…”

“What can we tell them? That their daughter might have been sucked into a book-world? That she may have got there looking for a way to visit our daughter, who’s also inside this book world? I don’t think either one would go down that well.”

“Taka’s right.” Keisuke agreed. “People think you’re nuts, if you say things like that. Trust me. I’ve been there.”

“That’s because it is nuts.” Makoto said frankly. “Like everything else in this family.”

He sighed.

“Sometimes I think it’d have been easier not being born a Sukunami.”

“So, what can we do?” Taka asked softly. “There’s no way of following Arina into that world for either Miaka or I now, or any way of tracking her activities. Without Chichiri’s magic, I don’t think we can even try and contact Hikari, either. We don’t know what’s happened in that world since she went there and we’ve had no contact so maybe it isn’t even possible, now. In the circumstances…”

“All we can do is try and find out *why* Arina was taken into the book.” Keisuke said sadly. “And then, if we can do that… maybe… we can find a way to bring her back.”

“I can’t see that there’s anything for you to be concerned about.”

Aishi Kakei, physician to the Emperor Kintsusei stepped back from his patient, offering her a warm smile as he bowed his head slightly towards her.

“Everything indicates that both you and the baby are in sterling health, Myoume-dono. Whilst I understand the desire to follow up every possible worry, I hope I can put your mind at rest.”

“It’s not really my mind that needs putting at rest, sensei.” Myoume returned the smile with a rueful one of her own, her gaze flitting briefly to her husband who stood in the doorway, arms folded as he leant up against the doorpost in a pretence of nonchalance. “I was badgered about it until I gave way and agreed to have you look at me. As usual, the expectant father is far more flustered than the expectant mother — it was just a funny dream, and I feel fine.”

“I don’t think it’s unusual for a man to be protective of his wife when she’s vulnerable.” Hyoushin defended himself now, a slightly wounded expression on his face. “Particularly a wife with such a past

record, Myoume. You and I both know that dreams are not always just dreams when you add psychic energy to the equation. Byakko's Toroki or not these days, your body still does not react the same as everyone else's on account of your stellar self. You make it sound like I am constantly flustering over you — but it seems to me that asking Aishi-sensei's opinion was nothing more than common sense."

Aishi laughed, shaking his head.

"I can assure you, Hyoushin-dono, that your wife is in excellent health." He said frankly. "I would consider that perhaps there are another four or five weeks before the child will make its appearance… but even though it is a first child, I do not anticipate complications. In a place like this, there are all the relevant facilities available at a moment's notice, after all."

He cast Myoume another smile.

"Though even if this was a small village with not even a local midwife on call, I would have confidence in mother and child coming through without issue." He added.

He bowed once more, then,

"If that is all, I will intrude on you both no further."

With that he was gone, leaving the Shougun and his seishi wife alone in the chamber.

"There." Myoume slipped off the bed, coming to slip her hands in her husband's as she met his gaze pensively with seiran eyes of her own. "Now you know, and you can stop worrying about me. I'm fine, and the doctor agrees with me. Our child is also fine — and if you were in any doubt, I can feel it moving and kicking right now, as if it wants to prove it, too. In a few weeks it'll all be over and then you'll be wondering what you were so concerned about. Won't you?"

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, then he nodded his head.

"Perhaps so." He acknowledged. "You will have to humour me, Myoume. Most everything dear that I have ever had I have in one way or another lost. And I do not want that to happen to you."

"Hyoushin…" Myoume's eyes softened, and she shook her head.

"It won't." She said pragmatically. "I'm a Seishi, so I'm stronger even than you are. I've fought demons and faced down insurrection even in the heart of Kutou's court. I've seen Gods dance over the Eastern skies and I've travelled to all four corners of this world. In comparison, what I'm about to do is something many women do

without problem during their lives. Your own mother did it three times with no damage to her health. There's no need to be so worried about it. It's a natural process — just another thing girls do."

"True." Hyoushin released his grip on her fingers, moving across to the window to where the statue of Seiryuu glittered in the feeble spring sunlight. "But you must also remember that I was very small when both my brother and sister were born. Kaliri and I were even barred from the house when Mother delivered Rayi — we were with a neighbour for almost a twenty four hour period, and we had no idea what was going on in our home in our absence."

He pressed his pale hands to the glass, biting his lip absently.

"My only experience with childbirth, therefore, was after I came to court." He added softly. "When Aoiketsu took his first breaths and I found myself in the position of his guardian."

His eyes clouded.

"After Ruiren-sama died bringing him into the world."

"Oh, Hyoushin…" Myoume sighed, coming to slip her arm around his broad body. "You are stupid. You've said a lot of times that Ruiren-sama was a weak woman. Physically as well as mentally. She gave everything to bring Aoi into the world, and the sacrifice she made was probably the bravest thing she ever did — something that gave Kutou a glimmer of hope and light in all of its chaos. But she knew she wouldn't survive the birth. You told me that. She was ill and frail and in poor physical condition when she sought sanctuary from Kintsusei-heika at Kutou's court. She came here and grovelled before him in order that her child might have a chance of being born alive, and more, being raised in safety. She was already prepared for death."

She smiled, leaning her head against him.

"I'm not like Ruiren-sama." She added. "I'm not weak. Noone is going to leave you — not me and not the child. That's a promise. I intend on being a mother to my baby. I have no intention of going anywhere else."

"And the dream?" Hyoushin turned to look at her, and Myoume shrugged.

"A dream." She said offhandedly. "What of it?"

"Myoume, stop being so dismissive of it." Hyoushin snapped, and Myoume stared at him in surprise.

"Hyoushin?"

“You think I was born yesterday, but I know you as well as anyone, if not better than most.” Hyoushin said in low tones. “You can dismiss your Seishi self, but I cannot. That Seishi self saved my life over and over again when we were fighting to bring Seiryuu to Kutou. But it also caused you to suffer — bad dreams, bad visions, tortured pictures of the future you could not change. Knowledge, information… many many things that flooded through you.”

He reached across to pat her gloved right hand.

“So long as the mark remains, so does Toroki.” He added. “Chichiri told me as much — that no matter when it seems to be over, it doesn’t mean a Seishi can stop being a Seishi. He and Tasuki have been pulled into Suzaku’s battles many times since their Priestess went home to her world. I don’t see why you should be any different.”

“My Priestess, as you put it, died a long time before I was even born.” Myoume said pragmatically. “I’m not like Chichiri and Tasuki. They were the original Seishi chosen to serve the true Miko, Yuuki Miaka, when she came to Kounan. In contrast, my soul may have been present at the summoning of Byakko, but I wasn’t. I’m Toroki’s reincarnation, but I’m not the real Toroki. She died a very long time ago. She and all her Seishi companions are gone. I was reborn to guard the Shinzahou in Byakko’s name. Now it’s gone, I have no reason to think about that life. I have no future visions. I haven’t done so since we saved Kutou, you know that. True, my touch still carries stellar abilities, but that’s the only hint of who I once was. I think you’re blowing it out of proportion. I’ve had many dreams since I came to live here permanently, but none were prophetic.”

“Does that mean none ever will be?”

“Hyoushin, why are you clinging onto this so hard?” Myoume demanded. “Can’t you take my word for it that there’s nothing to be worried about?”

“I wish I could.” Hyoushin admitted. “But you’re too important to me to just ignore it completely. Even if it is irrational or out of my comprehension. I am not a man of Seiryuu, or Byakko, or any of the four Gods. I am a Meihi and that culture still calls me most strongly. But I understand what those four Gods are capable of doing, if they choose. And I have no doubt that, if he wanted to use you as a puppet once more, Byakko would do so without a second thought.”

He frowned.

“I have not forgotten the reasons your brother had for turning against his stellar self.” He added soberly. “Byakko’s call overrides all

levels of human choice and existence. Your soul is Toroki's, and I often wish it was not. Despite all it has done for me, Myoume, and despite how selfish it may seem, there are many times when I would like it if you had never been one of the God's people. Not because I dislike any part of who you are or have been, but because it worries me that, one day, maybe he'll claim you again. And I… don't want to lose you."

"You are an idiot." Despite herself, Myoume grinned, hugging her husband tightly. "I promise you, even if by some fluke Byakko did want me, it wouldn't mean you'd not have me any more. Like Chichiri and Aidou-san, I'd always have a home to put first. You are the most important person I have, Hyoushin. Bar none. I left my homeland to be with you. I moved leagues away from my family to marry Kutou's Shougun. I'm learning Meihi because I want to understand your culture and strengthen the bond I already share with your sister. Do you really think Byakko has a chance of breaking that? Just like Suzaku has never separated Tasuki and Anzu-san, or Chichiri and Aidou-san — Byakko is never going to separate you and I. All right? I promise. No matter what. I wouldn't let you die, and I'm not going to run out on you, either. You're stuck with me, like it or not."

Hyoushin eyed her for a moment, then he smiled, touching his lips to her brow in a light kiss.

"I'm sorry." He said contritely. "I worry entirely too much, sometimes. I will try not to. But it is as you say. One dream is not enough for me to fear losing you. You are here, just as Chichiri remains at Aidou-san's side through all the things he has to do. I will have more faith in you, I promise. And now that Aishi-sensei has confirmed your good health, I need not worry about that, either."

"So instead you can worry about your Emperor and his upcoming nuptuals." Myoume suggested. "Since the arrival of a Princess will be a big event in itself."

"Kintsusei-sama hopes you will help make her at home, given your shared nationality." Hyoushin admitted, and Myoume nodded.

"So long as my family responsibilities don't call me, I will be glad to." She agreed. "We will be women of Byakko in the Dragon's land, after all. I should extend to her a Western welcome, if nothing else!"

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

So this was Eiyou.

Ouba glanced out of the window of the carriage, her dark blue eyes taking in each and every detail of the bustling Southern capital as they made their way through the busy streets. It had been almost twelve hours since they had left Hengei, with only a short break for a meal and for the tired horses to take on water. Though it had been brief, the pretty scenery deep within Western Kounan had helped to soothe the last of the Princess's ruffled nerves, and it was with a surprising amount of optimism that she absorbed their new surroundings.

Although Kounan was not as big as some of its neighbours, a long period of peace and prosperity had seen it thrive, and there was a sense of ease and contentment in the air as Sayo steered the carriage from one line of traffic to another. Though the people's dress was unlike anything she had seen in Sairou, and despite the fact several of the children who played at street corners lacked sandals on their feet, Ouba found herself touched by their genuine joviality.

"Kounan seems a happy place." She murmured, and at her words her companion stirred from her doze, casting her a quizzical look.

"Hime?"

"I'm sorry — I woke you up, didn't I?" Ouba looked contrite, and Kinka smiled ruefully.

"I should not have been sleeping." She admitted. "I'm supposed to be protecting you, after all. It should be me who apologises to you."

"Don't be silly." Ouba shook her head. "Besides, Kounan is peaceful, isn't it? Otherwise we wouldn't have stopped out in the open to eat earlier on."

"Even so." Kinka spread her hands. "You have my full attention now, in any case. What's bothering you? Something on your mind?"

"No, just thinking, really." Ouba shook her head. "Eiyou is the capital of the South, isn't it? Where Reizeitei-sama's palace is — the heart of Suzaku's land."

"Yes." Kinka nodded. "We've made good time, considering we're a

day later than planned. The weather is better in the South, and the roads have been clearer because of it."

She eyed her friend playfully.

"Tonight you'll be sleeping in a palace again." She added. "And Sayo and I will be less worried about your safety, in a place teeming with Imperial guards. Reizeitei-sama is one of your Lord Father's closest allies. Taking this route was a wise thought."

"It may sound spoiled or pretentious, but part of me is glad we'll be stopping at Kounan's court." Ouba admitted. "After what happened in Hengei…"

"I think it's better we don't talk about Hengei." Kinka said firmly, and Ouba frowned.

"You and Sayo have both been like this since we left." She objected. "It's all right, you know. I'm not going to have nightmares."

"Even so, I think it's better." Kinka said frankly. "And besides, we have other things to think of now, Hime. Look. Reizeitei-sama's hospitality seems to be as good as the rumours suggest. It seems the Emperor of Kounan has set out his stall to welcome us to his land, with guardsmen in full regalia."

"Really?" Ouba peered out of the window, and despite herself Kinka laughed.

"Aren't you going to at least pretend to be dignified?" She scolded, amused. "What would your Father say, Ouba-hime, if he thought you were scrabbling at the window trying to see our reception party?"

"I was just curious." Ouba flushed red. "Don't be mean, Kinka. It's been a long journey… at least I'm not crying about being a country away from home."

"True." Kinka relented. "Hey, Sayo's stopped the carriage. I guess that he's greeting the guards himself — it looks like they intend on escorting us through the city and into the palace grounds as Imperial guests."

"How did they know who we were?" Ouba wondered, and Kinka smiled.

"Sayo's livery." She replied simply. "It was agreed between your Lord Father and Reizeitei-sama that Ouba-hime's carriage would be driven by a man wearing blue and black with the insignia of the tiger on his breast. It's a custom often used by Sairou envoys when they come to Reizeitei-sama's court… and the easiest way to attract

Imperial attention without revealing who you were."

"Politics are so complicated." Ouba sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "All these things going on behind the scenes are confusing."

"That's why you should leave those to us to worry about." Kinka told her. "At least until we reach Kutou."

"I suppose so." Ouba acknowledged.

"Hime-sama, sorry to interrupt you, but Reizeitei-sama's men intend to ride with us to the palace, and there is a man who wishes to speak to you directly before we do."

Sayo swung open the door at that moment, and Ouba cast him a look of surprise.

"A man? What man? I don't understand."

"Ouba-hime, I'm sorry for the inconvenience and the suddenness of our meeting."

As if he had heard her words, the stranger came forward into her line of sight, bowing his head before her as he did so. He was young, Ouba realised — not much older than she was, if she was to guess, with long dark hair that was pulled together at the nape of his neck in a neat tail fastened with the white ties favoured by nobility. Yet it was the stranger's eyes which most startled her, for they glittered with the same seiran blue she had often seen among her father's courtiers, and for a moment she stared at him, taken completely off guard.

"My name is Kaiga Aoiketsu." The newcomer continued, as the silence threatened to continue. "I am here on behalf of his Highness Kintsusei of Kutou to greet you on your entry to Kounan."

"Of… Kutou?" At this Ouba jerked to attention, staring at the stranger anew. "You're… from the East, Kaiga-dono?"

"Yes, Hime." Aoiketsu agreed. "I act on Kintsusei-heika's behalf as an envoy to Reizeitei-sama's court here in Eiyou. At my Emperor's direct instruction I am to make myself available to accompany you to the East when you leave the Southern court — and to assist in any way I can in making your time in Kounan comfortable."

"I see." Ouba's expression cleared, and she offered him a smile. "I'm sorry, Kaiga-dono. I've been travelling so long I think I must have forgotten my manners. Thank you for taking the time to come and greet me personally. It's a great reassurance to me that Kintsusei-sama has thought so far ahead regarding my comfort and peace of mind."

“It’s my pleasure, Hime.” Aoiketsu assured her, returning the smile with a warm one of his own. “And I can assure you that such an action is quite a natural one for my Emperor to take. I am sure he holds your well-being as one of his highest concerns, since you are travelling so far for his sake.”

Despite herself, Ouba pinkened, feeling slightly guilty as she registered the sincerity in the young man’s voice. She had questioned Kintsusei’s intentions time and time again, she reminded herself. Yet here was someone in his service who clearly had no fears or doubts in the man to whom he had sworn his fealty.

She cast Kinka a glance.

“This is my companion and lady in waiting, Kei Kinka.” She said evenly. “She will, I hope, be able to accompany me all the way to Kutou?”

“I see no reason why not.” Aoiketsu dipped his head in acknowledgement of Ouba’s companion. “Certainly, Reizeitei-sama anticipated you would bring companions of your own on your journey. My only surprise is that you bring so few — but I can understand the risks of drawing attention to your carriage.”

“That was my Father’s thought, yes.” Ouba agreed.

“Kaiga-dono, have you been in the Emperor’s service long?” Kinka asked softly, and Aoiketsu spread his hands.

“You could say my whole life, since my mother was a nobleman’s widow who died not long after my birth.” He responded simply. “I was raised at court by the Emperor’s direct command — educated and trained alongside other war orphans and given the opportunity to serve my country in whatever way I chose. Kintsusei-heika is the Emperor who ended Kutou’s civil war, after all. He is a man in whom I have faith.”

“That’s comforting to hear, from someone who knows Kintsusei-sama well.” Ouba said composedly. “Thank you once again, Kaiga-dono. You will be most welcome on our journey East. If the Emperor has been kind enough to take such pains over my safety, I will not shun his gesture.”

“As you wish, Hime-sama.” Aoiketsu bowed his head again, then withdrew, leaving Ouba and Kinka once more alone.

“He was far too pretty to be an Easterner.” Kinka reflected, sitting back in her seat, and Ouba laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

“Kinka-chan! He might hear you, lower your voice!”

“It wasn’t that loud an observation.” Kinka replied unrepentantly. “Besides, it’s true. Did you see his eyes? Those aren’t Eastern eyes. Yes, he spoke with an Eastern accent, but I’m telling you — that boy has Western blood in him somewhere. You won’t find anyone at Kintsusei-sama’s court like that.”

“They startled me too.” Ouba acknowledged, smoothing her skirts over her knees as Sayo fastened the carriage door. “I thought the same as you — that the indigenous Kutou-jin had dark eyes as a rule. But I don’t know much about the tribes in the East, Kinka. Kutou isn’t like Sairou in that there aren’t so many distinct peoples thanks to their wars and slave trade. But even so…”

“The Meihi in the north and the Hin, such as they were, in the western provinces.” Kinka said categorically. “One stolen from Hokkan, the other from Sairou. Kutou have never welcomed diversity… so what’s his story?”

“His story?” Ouba looked surprised. “You think he was lying?”

“Actually, I don’t.” Kinka admitted. “He didn’t seem like the kind of person who was good at lying, to be honest with you. I was just curious. Still, though, if his account of Kintsusei-heika is the truth, you can rest a little bit more easily. To provide for an orphaned noble son and raise him to help promote peace within the East is a positive sign. I think your Father’s intelligence was correct. Kintsusei-sama is not a monster. And you should probably not be afraid of him.”

“Yes, probably.” Ouba looked pensive. “But he is still twice my age, and a soldier King to boot. Still, I suppose we’ll see. That he’s concerned enough to have his agents here alerted for my arrival makes me feel a bit better disposed towards him.”

She cast Kinka a glance.

“You don’t mind that I said that his envoy could accompany us, do you?”

“Not really.” Kinka shook her head. “Since we’ll be going into his land, it might be as well to have a local with us. And we’ve time to get to grips with him at Kounan’s court before we do. As you said, you can’t shun Kintsusei-sama’s gesture. At least this way we’ll be fully versed in the kind of person Kaiga Aoiketsu is before we leave Eiyou. And so much to the good.”

“I think we might find out much more about Kintsusei-heika, too.” Ouba said reflectively. “And the more I know, the more prepared I

am."

"Now you sound more like me." Kinka grinned. "And I guess that's the palace, judging by the huge golden gates and the marble columns in every direction. What do you think, Hime? How does it compare with your palace, back in Sairou?"

"It's very elegant." Ouba acknowledged, as the carriage swept through the open gates, guardsmen saluting on each side as they drew into the main courtyard. "Sashi said that Reizeitei-sama was noted for his elegance and beauty as an individual, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised about that. It's beautiful, Kinka-chan — but it isn't home. Still, I'm tired and I could use a chance to wash, eat and sleep in a more comfortable place than we have been doing these past few nights. The inn was fine, but I suppose… I'm too spoiled after all."

"Refined is the word I'd use." Kinka dimpled, as the carriage pulled to a gentle stop once more, Sayo immediately on hand to open the door and extend his arm to help the tired Princess down onto the gleaming cobbles. As she stepped out properly into the Kounan sunshine, Ouba was struck by how many people had come to witness her arrival, and for a moment she felt uncharacteristically shy, hesitating as Sayo helped Kinka down beside her.

"Ouba-hime, welcome to the Palace of Kounan." Aoiketsu's Eastern tones broke through her haze and she turned, offering him a grateful smile as she realised he had read her uncertainty perfectly. "On Reizeitei-sama's orders, a room has been prepared for you and additional quarters alongside for your companions."

He gestured to a broad man in his middle years who had stepped forward, bowing low before them, before raising his face to meet the Princess's gaze.

"Allow me to introduce Haku Shouei-sama, Reizeitei-heika's trusted Prime Minister and advisor in all matters of government." He added.

"The pleasure is entirely mine, Ouba-hime." Haku said gravely. "I am glad that your Honoured Father bestows so much trust in us here that he so specifically singled out Eiyou as a stopping point for you on your travels East."

"Haku-dono, I'm very happy to be here and indebted to you for your graciousness." Something in the minister's sober words reminded Ouba of who and where she was, and her brother's words about pride and honour flitted through her head. "To all of Kounan, in fact. It is my first visit, but I sincerely hope it will not be my last. My family greatly value their political ties with the Southern lands, and I am

eager to convey in person my Father and brother's cordial best wishes to your honoured Emperor."

"Then it will be my pleasure to receive them, Ouba-hime."

The words were softly spoken, yet somehow they struck through the buzz of the crowd and as one man the guards and onlookers parted, dropping to their knees as their gesture revealed the tall, slender form of a young man. He was clearly the same age as Aoiketsu, yet with somehow three times as much grace and poise in his bearing as he made his way slowly towards them. Despite herself Ouba remembered Sashi's comments and she felt a flush rise in her cheeks as she realised that this was Reizeitei himself — the often talked about King of Kounan.

"Haku, Aoiketsu, thank you for extending welcome to our guests." He said quietly, his words well-formed and precise, yet somehow without ceremony as he acknowledged each of the two men with a slight, warm nod, gesturing for his courtiers to assume their former stances. "I will now take it upon myself to do so — and to express my hope that the journey here has, as yet, not proven too tiresome?"

Ouba swallowed hard, suddenly bereft of words, and at her discomfort, Reizeitei smiled.

"I'm sorry. I have forgotten the most basic manners in my excitement to greet you." He said contritely, and Ouba's eyes widened as she realised he had taken with ease the responsibility for her sudden lapse in composure. "Of course, I should introduce myself to you formally, should I not? You must forgive me, Ouba-hime. It is not often that foreign Princesses are the honoured guests at my court."

He bowed his head slightly, then,

"I am Reizeitei, Fifth Emperor of Kounan and Suzaku's appointed ruler of the Southern Lands." He said softly. "As Heiboutei-sama's counterpart and ally, I trust that you will consider this place a second home while you are here, and therefore I extend to you the trust which your Honoured Father and I have so long shared."

"Reizeitei-sama, thank you." Ouba found her tongue at last, offering him a smile as she extended her hand to his. "I have heard many good stories of Kounan's hospitality. I shall now be able to write home and advise my family of their truth."

"You are not too weary, I trust, to accompany me for dinner this evening?" Reizeitei questioned. "Your companions too are most welcome, should they see fit. I generally dine in my private quarters,

except on special occasions, so you need not worry about being overwhelmed with people. It will simply be myself, my Lady Mother, Lord Haku, of course, and a few others."

He gestured to Aoiketsu, who bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"Aoiketsu has been chosen by Lord Kintsusei to see to your well-being on his behalf, so he will also be present." He added. "The pleasure of your company would be most welcome."

"Then I will accept on my behalf and on the behalf of my companion Kei Kinka." Ouba said evenly. "Though I have already promised Sayo a night of freedom upon arriving here, if you will excuse him. He has been most kind in his attention to us across Sairou's land, and I must not burden him more than is necessary."

"It is settled then." Reizeitei looked pleased. "I will look forward to it."

He glanced at Aoiketsu again.

"Aoi, I would have you inform Hikari for me of tonight's plans, since I will need her to attend this dinner also." He added. "So long as it does not inconvenience her — I realise she is hard at her studies at present, but I think it would be well if she came."

"I'll tell her." Aoiketsu agreed. "Don't worry, Heika. She and I will both be there."

"Then I shall leave you in the good hands of my palace attendants, who will show you to your quarters and answer any need you have." Reizeitei decided. "You are all very welcome in Kounan, Ouba-hime. Very welcome indeed."

"Well, he's not a disappointment, is he?"

As the Princess and her companions were led through the halls of the palace, Kinka drew closer to Ouba, lowering her voice. "Reizeitei-sama. He lives up to the rumours of his appearance… he truly is an honest to God *bishounen* type."

"Kinka!" Ouba cast her a reproving look. "First Kaiga-dono, now the Emperor himself? We're not at home, you know. We don't want to cause offence."

"I know. It was just an observation." Kinka shrugged. "Perhaps it's something in the southern water. What do you think?"

"Or Suzaku's blood." Ouba murmured. "Reizeitei-sama is the son of Saihitei-sama, isn't he? The Emperor who was born with Suzaku's

mark? He was rumoured to be very handsome, too… it must be in his blood."

"Who do you suppose this Hikari is?" Kinka wondered, and Ouba shook her head.

"You know as much as I do." She replied. "Do you think it was wrong of me to dismiss Sayo? After everything… would you have rather I had kept him with us, and not released him to his own devices now we're here?"

"No… I don't feel any danger here." Kinka shook her head. "Everything seems fine to me. But I would like to know all the players, just to be on the safe side."

"Well, the there's one way to find out." Ouba mused. She turned to the nearest attendant, raising her voice.

"His Highness mentioned a lady would be joining us for dinner this evening." She said pleasantly. "But I was not aware that Reizeitei-sama had any female companions at his court. Could you enlighten me? It will be nice to dine in mixed company, after all."

"Yes, Hime." The woman bowed, nodding her head. "Reizeitei-heika was likely referring to Lady Hikari when he made such remarks."

"Hikari… yes. That name is familiar." Ouba agreed. "And she is a close associate of his? How interesting."

"Hikari-hime is the Emperor's sister, Ouba-sama." The woman agreed seriously. "A most blessed and treasured lady to whom all of Kounan bow. It is said she has the power of the God himself buried deep within her heart, and his kindness and benevolence too. She is a truly great person, and someone the Emperor respects most highly."

"His sister." Ouba breathed. "I see. I didn't know he had a sister. Then I will be twice as eager to meet her, since she is as I am — the sibling of a great Prince. Thank you. You have put my mind wholly at rest."

"With pleasure, Hime-sama." The woman bowed, pushing open the door of a huge chamber and indicating respectfully for her companions to enter. "And if I may, these rooms are yours to do with as you please. Anything we can fetch or do for you while you are here, please, you only need ask and it will be done. We have strict instructions from the Emperor himself and we will do whatever is in our power to see that your stay here is passed in comfort and security."

With that she too was gone, and Kinka let out her breath in a rush, glancing around the room as she did so.

“Fit for a princess. Literally.” She reflected. “And I imagine my room leads off yours there, as a travelling lady companion’s is wont to do in such circumstances. Yes, Hime, I think we can definitely confirm Kounan’s record for hospitality.”

“Reizeitei-sama was kind to me, too, in the courtyard.” Ouba reflected, sinking down onto the immense, softly-covered bed with a sigh. “I froze and couldn’t speak, but he responded as though the fault was his, not mine. Father has always said Kounan’s Princes are raised with the ultimate honour and I think it’s true. Young as he is, he has just as much presence as Father does, somehow.”

“Don’t start talking like that, or people will think your eyes are straying to the wrong Emperor.” Kinka warned, and Ouba blushed.

“I don’t mean it that way.” She defended herself. “It was just kind of him. That’s all. Believe me, I’ve no thoughts of anything else.”

“The Emperor’s sister, huh.” Kinka moved to the window, gazing out across the courtyard. “It’s funny, you know. I could have sworn that Reizeitei-sama’s father died before he was born, and that he was an only child as a result. Was I wrong?”

“You keep asking questions just when I’m trying to feel at ease.” Ouba scolded. “Now what are you worried about? You said it felt safe here. Are you changing your mind? This is foreign land, true enough, but Reizeitei-sama is Father’s ally. Isn’t he?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I need to stop thinking aloud.” Kinka apologised. “I suppose all will be made clear sooner or later.”

“Do you think the maid was right, when she said that this Princess Hikari had the God’s magic inside of her?” Ouba wondered. Kinka shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She said thoughtfully. “But I think I’d be interested to find out. I’m glad I’m coming with you to dinner tonight, Ouba-sama. I’m rather looking forward to meeting this Hikari-hime.”

The snow was beginning to fall once more over the steep slopes of Koku-zan as the young man made his way nimbly between the rocks and pitfalls, plotting his course with pinpoint accuracy despite the fact most of the landscape was still shrouded in a thick white veil. Though a bitter winter wind whipped around him, teasing at his long, straight hair, he did not falter nor shiver, whistling a soft tune under his

breath as he pushed forward with his task.

It would become heavy later, he reflected, casting an experienced eye up at the clouds that hung heavy and grey above his head. The signs were all there that a blizzard was in the offing, yet he did not feel afraid. Snow was as natural an element to him as rainwater to water birds, and ever since he could remember he had loved playing in the soft, cloud-like flakes, gathering them up to throw at his childhood friends, or, as they had grown older, pushing the snow into hard packed blocks to form playhouses and other dens and shelters. The snow was, he knew, just another fact of life for the people who lived in these parts, and as such, he had always held it dear in his heart.

For Kishayi, it was simply another day like any other. Winter was, after all, the longest season in Hokkan, and in the mountains in particular, there was seldom more than four months together when the snow did not fall. On these rare occasions, glimpses of the ebony rock that gave the mountain its true name would be seen, but for the most part Koku-zan was blanketed in a haze of white, giving the mountain a sense of mystique to the people who lived nearby. In the cave at the peak, Kishayi knew that treasures had once been hidden. But to him it was Bali's mountain — the one place in all of the ShijinTenchishou where he and his people were guaranteed safety.

He stepped carefully over the village boundary, bringing his hands together instinctively in a prayer of protection as he glanced at the half-obscured stones. Each of them was marked with a distinctive sign that, as youngsters, he and his fellows had all learnt to read, recite and write before anything else. Though he knew that his people had suffered in the past, now they had had their peace returned. And on Koku-zan more than anywhere, the prayers of gratitude were constantly in men's thoughts.

At the furthest perimeter of the slope was a familiar cluster of pine trees, some heavy with patches of white interspersing their dark, near-black branches. Deep within the centre of these trees, there was a copse so thickly overhung with trees that only a few flakes of snow could penetrate to the ground. These trees had also provided a natural shelter for plants and wildlife alike and deep within this place, Kishayi knew, grew several of the herbs that his people used to fashion both their remedies and their holy offerings to Bali during the winter's coldest time. Although few plants grew on the mountain during the long frozen season, Kishayi and his people had never been afraid of starvation. On the contrary, between their pragmatism in fashioning items for trade in the nearby city of Touran, and their faith in Bali's

ongoing protection, noone in the village had suffered even the faintest hint of malnutrition since the settlement had first become established.

Kishayi did not remember that day, but he had grown up with the same values nonetheless. And although he was somewhat fearful of Touran and its many strange things, he was not afraid of snow or anything that cold weather had to bring.

As he slipped carefully through the spiky branches, pushing them back one by one, he reflected ruefully on how he was the only member of his tribe who had ever been able to penetrate the copse properly without suffering scratches to his arms and legs. Although he had never been able to explain it as anything more than good fortune, he had always felt safe among the pine trees, and though some of his fellows had teased him when he had voiced it, he had almost felt as though the trees, too, felt safe in his presence.

It was like some unspoken understanding between him and Bali's natural world. And as a result, ever since Kishayi had turned twelve years old, it had been his chief responsibility to retrieve the herbs from the secret grove.

He knelt down on the ground, carefully spreading out the thick sackcloth he had brought with him for the purpose, as he began to examine the surrounding plants carefully for the best and most vibrant looking leaves. Some, he knew, would be better used fresh, whereas some cures required a more mature leaf, the edges just curling and fading from their original green to a more dusky hue. A few of them were beginning to flower, pushing up brave buds despite the chilly weather, and painstakingly he inspected each and every one of these, too, brushing his fingers against the stems as he made up his mind. Sometimes, he knew, just touching them would persuade the blooms to open up and reveal to him whether or not they contained enough pollen to be useful in a cure for fever or a remedy for pine rash, but he had been doing it for long enough to be able to judge the flowers even when closed.

One day, he told himself firmly, he would follow in Mikoyi-sensei's footsteps and become the physician for the village. But for now, it was enough to know that his mother was proud of his progress, and that his people had faith in him to help select some of the most vital things to their village's survival.

He paused for a moment, a shadow flitting across his gaze as he contemplated his mother. To make her proud of him was his dearest wish, yet he knew that no matter what he did, he could not erase the painful things that had haunted the woman's past. She rarely spoke of

it, but just sometimes he would see a faraway look in her amethyst eyes, and he would know that she was remembering the husband and the two sons who she had lost so many years before.

Kishayi had never known his father, nor either of his two elder brothers. His sadness at their absence he knew was only the sadness he felt when that look entered his mother's gaze, and it had always sparked in him a resolve to do his best.

She did not have them any more, after all. But she had him, and no matter what it took, he would make her proud.

He set the herbs down on the sackcloth, counting them carefully as he began to tie the stems together into even bundles. Mikoyi would instruct him on which plants to hang where on his return, but for now it was easier to keep them together in like clumps, ready for transportation back to the village. Though the copse was sheltered, his keen hearing could make out the growing heaviness of the snow shower on the outside, and he got to his feet, tying the ends of the cloth together to make a bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

Though he loved snow, and did not fear it, he also knew when it was foolish to linger in a blizzard.

As he parted the branches to step out into the snow, something bright and white assailed his vision and for a moment he faltered, half-thinking it was some trick of winter sunlight dancing across the white-coated ground. Then, as his vision cleared, he made out the faint form of something in the snow, the bright colours somehow at odds with the bleak, alpine surrounds.

For a moment Kishayi hesitated, then, very slowly, he approached the object, a prickle running down his spine as he drew nearer. It was not a thing at all, he realised, apprehension growing inside of him as he registered the thick mop of curly dark hair, and the pale skin of a human being huddled unconscious against the snow. Fear surged through him as he realised that not only was she human but that she was from Outside. Unlike him, with his ash-pale skin and long silver hair, this stranger's hair was as black as the rock that gave Koku-zan it's name, and more, as he crouched anxiously at her side, he realised that her features were more like the people he had seen in Touran than any of his fellow kin.

His first impulse was to flee but, as he registered the pinched, blue look to her features he gritted his teeth, forcing himself to calm down. She was an Outsider, true enough, and he did not know what her purpose was on his mountain. Yet she was no older than he was, and

if he turned his back now, she would surely die of exposure.

“And if I left her to die, I might as well not call myself a Meihi.” He muttered under his breath, reaching out a tentative hand to touch her neck. Her skin felt cool and clammy, and as he made contact with it, something odd rushed through his body, leaving him momentarily gasping. At first he did not think she had a pulse, but then, faintly he felt it and somehow this reassurance that at least in this she was the same as him seemed to bolster him. He gathered his resolve once more, then, carefully he slid his hands beneath her still body, lifting her up in his arms.

She did not stir, completely lost in her hypothermic stupor, and Kishayi was surprised at how light she felt, clutched to his body like that. Despite his initial fear, suddenly he knew that he did not want her to die, and that, if anyone would know how to help her, it would be his mentor, Mikoyi.

“So I’ll take her back to the village.” He resolved. “Bakaru would understand — even though she’s from Outside, she needs help. Just like Bali did in the past, helping the traveller… I can’t abandon the girl to die. Surely Mikoyi-sensei will know what to do.”

He glanced at her, biting his lip as he took in her still, limp form. She was dressed like nothing he had ever seen before, not even among the odd people who populated Touran, and absently he wondered what kind of stranger he had chosen to rescue.

Still, he comforted himself, it wouldn’t matter for long. He’d take her back, and then Mikoyi would heal her, and then she’d be sent home. And he would be able to rest easy knowing that he’d done his best to help.

“Hang on a while longer.” He murmured, knowing that she probably would not hear him but not wanting to make the walk back in silence. “With Bali’s grace we’ll help you — so just hold on!”

Hakuinden
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Owari